

*The
Individualist*
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Philip Gibbs

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THE INDIVIDUALIST

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A NOVEL

BY
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THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD,
THE RECKLESS LADY,
HEIRS APPARENT, ETC.



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CHAPTER I

A LETTER had been delivered to the mistress of Long Stretton village school as she sat at her desk in the classroom, where thirty-five boys and girls of varying ages and sizes had been listening to the story of Robin Hood and his merry men. The bearer of the note was the page-boy from the Hall, rising four feet and a half, in tight little livery with many gold buttons. A thundering knock at the school door had announced his coming and startled Alicia Frensham and her children in the very midst of the delectable adventure of the outlaw and Friar Tuck. Then with a solemnity which did honour to his training, he advanced across the school floor in a fire of eyes and delivered the note to the woman who, in this very room, had spanked him not longer than six months before.

"A note from the 'All, miss."

"My dear Tommy, why not say Hall? Have you forgotten my lessons already?"

She reproved him with her eyes as she slipped her paper knife through the envelope. As soon as she began to read, however, Tommy took a deep breath, after the conscientious fulfilment of his duty, and, turn-

ing round, put his tongue out to his former school-fellows.

The letter he had delivered contained the following message:—

“To Miss Alicia Frensham.

“My dear,

“My sister and I would be so much obliged if you would call at the Hall after school hours. Mr. Stretton has suddenly telegraphed to say he will be with us this afternoon, and there is so much to do hurriedly in which your nimble fingers and admirable taste would be invaluable. Pray forgive my troubling you during school time, and believe me,

“Yours sincerely,

“Cecily Wingfield.

“P.S.—As Mr. Stretton is our nephew and heir, we are naturally desirous to do him honour.

“P.SS.—My sister begs me to say she hopes very much you will come.

“Stretton Hall, Monday.”

The mistress took a sheet of notepaper and wrote her answer swiftly:—

“My dear Miss Wingfield.

“I shall be delighted to come and help.

“Yours very sincerely,

“Alicia Frensham.”

She thought for a moment, with the end of her penholder in her mouth. Then she added:—

“P.S.—I am sure you will rejoice to see your nephew again after so many years.”

Before the boy went with this note the mistress took him by the arm, pulling him towards her and rumpling his hair, in spite of his shout of protest and his endeavours to twist from her strong white hand. A shrill burst of laughter rattled the school windows, renewed when, after a pat on his chubby cheek, the boy wriggled himself free, and with all his dignity gone made a dash for the door, and so escaped.

“Silence!” cried the schoolmistress, clapping her hands.

For an hour more the class was continued, and after the reading lesson the children copied out a passage of prose. The mistress went down their ranks, bending over the shoulder of one to correct a misspelt word, guiding the pencil of another, letting her hand rest lightly on the flaxen curls of a tiny girl. As she stood like this, the sun streaming through the leaded window-panes caught her hair, giving a reddish tint to what in a dull light was dark brown, and deepened the colour in her cheeks. She was a tall, thin girl, simply dressed in black, rather flat-chested, and with noticeably large hands, though white and well-modelled. Her face was hardly beautiful. Many people fond of the plump insipid prettiness of the picture postcard kind would have called it plain. Yet with her brown

serious eyes, her high cheek bones touched with carnation red, her long sensitive mouth and pointed chin, and her brown hair coiled loosely above a low broad brow, there was a wild-rose air about her that was curiously haunting to some men, and to some women too.

There was a virginity in her eyes, and a touch of mysticism. Yet, when she laughed, which was often, her merriment made her face seem very roguish, so that those who had been scared by her saint-like look were startled by a hint of devilry.

The words of a friend who knew her later hit off the character in a curious way, suggestive, but not altogether accurate. He was an artist, and the phrase came naturally to his lips.

"Good Lord!" he said, with a little gasp. "There is Rossetti's Beata Beatrix transformed into a wood-nymph by Giorgione."

Then he said more deliberately, "There is passion behind those brown eyes—and I would not be the man to run up against that pointed chin."

There was one expression, however, that quite altered the face of Alicia Frensham, and yet was often to be seen. It was when some child suddenly took her hand and fondled it, or when she caught up some little one who had fallen and cried to her for help. Or, again, it might be seen for a moment when she dismissed the school and stood at the gate with a brood of youngsters about her skirts. It was an expression of hungry love, the look one may see on the face of a

young wife expecting her firstborn, and filled with the foreknowledge of maternity.

The mothers of Long Stretton said that Miss Frensham was "fair daft on childer," and indeed it was a kind of madness with her. People who had only seen her demure, with a face like a saint in a stained-glass window, were astonished if they suddenly met her down a lane or on the moors racing a bevy of her school children with flying skirts and her brown hair unlooped upon her ears, and in her eyes the look of an untamed creature. Some of the mothers were almost jealous of her, for their babes would sometimes cry to be taken to her, or when they left her.

She had pluck too. When she had first come to the school three years before there was a spirit of mutiny and disorder among half a dozen of the elder boys, who had been the terror of the former mistress. One of them, the son of the butcher, a strong lubberly youth of twelve, had thrown a ruler at her head when she had commandeered some sticky sweetstuff which he had been handing round to his comrades. The stick had cut her cheek open, but with the blood flowing down her face she sprang at the young scoundrel and dragging him from the bench gave him the smartest hiding he had had in his life. The fellow fought with tooth and nail and kicked her with his hobnailed boots, but at the end of five minutes he howled for mercy. That evening Squire the butcher came round to her schoolhouse with the boy, who was still aching from her punishment (and with another from his father

on the top of it) and thanked her warmly for having dealt so admirably with "the young varmint." He also sent round a shoulder of mutton and some pig's trotters the next morning in token of his esteem. It was a moral victory, and from that day there was no other mutiny in the village school.

To-day, when the note had come down from Stretton Hall, Alicia Frensham dismissed her class punctually at twelve, and did not stand so long as usual at the gate watching her children as they went home to dinner, dancing and running with merry squeals and shouts. She packed them off promptly, and shutting the door after the last small boy, tidied up her papers and cleaned the black-board with swift deft hands.

Then she stood for a moment with her elbows on the window sill, leaning her pointed chin on the palm of her hand and looking down the village street with its old grey stone houses towards a clump of trees beyond, through which appeared the gables of Stretton Hall. She was thinking of "Mr. Stretton," as his aunt had called him in her prim, polite letter. She wondered whether he would be at all like her mental picture of him, or would correspond to his aunt's enthusiastic descriptions of his virtues. Stretton Wingfield was a name often seen in the papers during recent days. His adventures as an explorer in Central Africa had been chronicled at length and made him a popular hero for a week or two. Then his two novels, *The Under Secretary* and *A Social Atom*, had attracted the

attention of the reviewers by their peculiar mixture of cynicism and sentiment, by their clever satire upon modern politics and society, and by their bold attack upon English conventions. Alicia Frensham had read the review of the last book in the *Daily Telegraph*, which had devoted a column of adverse criticism to it. "Mr. Wingfield is trading upon the reputation of his father as the wit of the House of Commons and the licensed jester of society, to make cheap epigrams about venerable institutions and to slander the profession of politics of which his father was a distinguished ornament. We advise him in all friendliness to remember his youthfulness and to cultivate more reverence," etc.

She remembered some such phrases as these about a book which she had read with intense interest and with a constant feeling of astonishment that it was written by the nephew of the two spinster ladies at Stretton Hall.

Their very name was associated in her mind with a beautiful old-fashioned morality, with "early Victorian" views of life, with sweet and fragrant charity. But the book appealed to her own secret spirit of rebellion against orthodoxy, class distinction, and social conventions. It was the work of a revolutionary, of a wandering social atom who had come into touch with the highest and lowest phases of humanity, and who recognised under the veneer of civilisation the primitive conditions and passions of the savage people among whom the writer had lived for a time in Central Africa. In her innocence of the world she could not test the

truthfulness of the author's satire of civilisation, but she knew enough of her own heart to be touched and even to be excited by his revelation and tacit approval of the poetry of passion which, in the author's words, "proved the divine relationship between heroes, saints, and brutes."

When Alicia Frensham passed through the iron gates of Stretton Hall, and looked up at the grey old building with its pointed gables, its mullioned windows, its leaden water pipes decorated with the Wingfield crest and the date 1541, its oak doors, worm-eaten and worn by centuries of weather, its smooth green lawns, and the spreading cedar trees beneath which Charles II. had once kissed the hand of Cecily Wingfield when he left a three days' hiding place, she thought again how strange it was that Stretton Wingfield, the heir to this house and to all its ancient and honoured traditions, should have written a book so socialistic in its philosophy and so revolutionary in spirit.

* * * * *

"My dear," said Miss Cecily Wingfield, who was waiting for her at the hall door, "we are so excited!"

"You must be," said Alicia, taking the little lady's thin hand and touching it with her lips.

"You see it is a great event. Mr. Stretton has not been here since he was sixteen years old—that was when he broke one of the windows with a tennis ball. I have told you about it, my dear. It was the one that had Sir Charles Wingfield's name on it, scratched with a diamond, and the date 1642 with the legend

'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.' I cried when it was broken—it was as if a piece had been chipped out of my heart, and I remember Stretton laughed and said, 'Old things must give way to new, and a tennis ball is more harmless than a cannon ball.' I remember, too, poor Agnes would not allow him any pudding that day, and he was so angry he took the afternoon train to his father's house in town, saying that old maids and young boys did not harmonise."

The lady smiled at the recollection, though her grey eyes twinkled a little with moisture at the memory of the tears she had shed over the precious piece of glass.

"Mr. Stretton is a man now, and I hope we shall harmonise a little better. Of course, as our heir we are anxious to do everything to please him. I hope he will not be too dull. Poor Agnes is dreadfully afraid he will be bored."

It was a characteristic of the two ladies that they always spoke of each other as "poor Agnes" and "poor Cecily." It was perhaps an unconscious admission of disappointment and pathos of two lives which had always been rather lonely and filled with unsatisfied hopes.

"I trust he will not think the place dilapidated," continued Miss Cecily anxiously, still holding Alicia's hand and giving it now and again an affectionate little squeeze. "We are so anxious not to destroy any of the characteristics of the old house and garden, that perhaps we have not been sufficiently attentive to modern improvements. What do you think, Alicia?"

"I should hate anything modern inside these gates," said the school-mistress with a sincerity that was very pleasing to Miss Cecily, "and nothing could improve a place so perfectly beautiful."

"Ah!" said the old lady with another gentle squeeze at Alicia's hand. "But some people reproach us for letting it go 'to rack and ruin,' as they say, little knowing how cruelly the words hurt us. Only yesterday Mrs. Bellamy said she could not think why we did not have a new doorstep to replace this hollowed-out old stone. 'It is almost a danger, my dear,' she said."

"And what did you say to such an abominable idea?" said Alicia.

Miss Cecily's voice shook a little with stress of emotion, and her gesture was dramatic.

"'I would rather die,' I said, 'than move the stone which has been worn by the footsteps of my forefathers, and which has been the threshold of our home, for five centuries.' Perhaps I spoke a little too sharply."

"I should have been brutal with such a woman," said Alicia. "It is astonishing to see how some people go through life without seeing any of its beauty and poetry. It is as if they had been 'born blind.'"

"Well, you at any rate were born kind and good," said Miss Cecily. "Come in, my dear, and help us with those willing hands of yours—strong and philanthropic hands I always say to poor Agnes."

Alicia was not astonished at the confusion and bewilderment which reigned inside the Hall. She

knew how trivial an event would disturb the harmony of a household composed mostly of old people, whose lives had been spent away from the turmoil of the modern world in this haunt of ancient peace. To-day the telegram from Stretton Wingfield, which lay carefully smoothed out on the polished oak table in the hall, was a message intensely exciting, not only to the two maiden ladies, but to the butler who had served them since their childhood, to the housekeeper who tyrannised over them in all matters of cleaning, cooking, and household management, to the gardener who was also coachman, and to the boarhound whose devotion to the two ladies was only equalled by the love they lavished on his massive and venerable head.

Alicia sat down on one of the oak settles and laughed softly at the scene of flurry that was taking place in the Hall. Miss Agnes, with a patch of flour on her nose, was down on her knees before a trunk full of ancient tapestries from which she was selecting hangings for her nephew's bedroom, utterly perplexed as to whether the Tudor set with the hunting scene, or the Stuart set depicting the progress of Cupid through "the fayre Realme of Love," would be most suitable for a bachelor's room. In after years, whenever Alicia smelt the fragrance of lavender and camphor, there would come to her mind the picture of the frail little lady with yellow-grey hair, in her black silk dress and old lace fichu, on her knees before the oak chest with the faded embroideries around her on the floor. And at this memory Alicia's eyes would be moist,

and a hundred other memories of the peaceful old home with its two gracious women would come flooding back to her.

To-day "poor" Miss Agnes was almost distracted with her anxieties to have everything in order for the sudden visit of her nephew. Blinkworthy, the butler, had lost his nerve completely, and what was more disastrous, the old man had also lost in his flurry the key of the wine vault from which he wished to get a bottle of the port laid down on Stretton Wingfield's first birthday. He had made several journeys to the cellar to gaze fondly at the dust-buried bottles, but after his last visit he had carried away the key and put it down in some "safe place," the whereabouts of which baffled his failing memory. Miss Agnes heard the news with a little shriek of dismay, and Blinkworthy stood with his hands pressed to his bald head striving, so it seemed, to squeeze out the secret of the fatal hiding place. Mrs. Hibbert, the housekeeper, had also come to Miss Agnes with a tale of woe, and with her hands on her waist wheezed out a prolix description of the dirt she had found lurking in unsuspected places. "Which, my dearie," she said, "is coals of fire upon the head of that hussy Betty, who should be fair ashamed of herself, and like enough to send Master Stretton back to town with a stomach-ache."

To add to the dramatic effect of this domestic scene, Lion, the boarhound, disconcerted by this unaccustomed clatter of tongues, roamed about the rooms in

a dismal way, raising his great head at regular intervals to bark with a deep and mournful note.

"My dear," said Miss Cecily presently, when after Alicia's advice the Stuart tapestries had been settled upon for Stretton Wingfield's room, "my dear, whatever is that flour on your nose?"

Miss Agnes's transparent skin flushed with a beautiful pink, and she hurriedly rubbed the wrong side of her nose.

"It was a little sentimental idea of mine," she confessed. "I have been making the same pudding which I refused poor Stretton when he broke the window. I—I thought I would make amends for that past severity. Hibbert wanted to keep me out of the kitchen, but I insisted. It was a foolish whim, but it pleased me."

Thereupon she laughed in a sweet silvery voice that always seemed to Alicia like the high notes of the rosewood spinet in the drawing-room. Miss Agnes and Alicia joined in her mirth, but in the heart of each of them, that simple little thought of making the pudding which Stretton had liked as a boy touched some chord of sentiment that brought a little moisture to their eyes, though they knew not why.

Alicia was appointed to the task of plucking flowers from the garden and arranging them in the hall and drawing-room. It was a task of some delicacy, for she was accompanied by old Birch the gardener, to whom the flowers were as well-beloved children. Anxious as he was to please "the young master," as he called

Stretton Wingfield, he could not refrain from groaning dismally when Alicia's scissors went swiftly to work among the blooms which he had tended and watered and watched since their birth.

"'Tis allays the same," he said, shaking his white old head. "Wimmen will allays throw their jewels afore swine."

"Swine!" cried Alicia, pointing her scissors above the head of a big tea-rose. "Is that what you call Mr. Stretton?"

"The Lord forbid," said the old man hastily. "Master Stretton do be one of his family—a real Wingfield, God be praised. But he don't take much account for flowers, judging as how he trampled on the beds when he was here a boy, just ten years since. I could have broken his young bones, I could!"

"Boys will be boys, you know, Birch," said Alicia, having no mercy on the tea-rose, though the old man touched her arm with a trembling hand and with an involuntary gesture of restraint.

"They be mainly young devils," he growled. "My word, miss," he added, peering with gloomy eyes into Alicia's apron—one of Miss Cecily's—"you've been an' plucked all my beauties—the very best, an' no mistake."

Alicia laughed gaily, and infected by the excitement which had taken possession of the whole household bounded into the hall with her apron full of blossoms which she emptied, a heap of fragrant colour, upon the round table.

"How wonderful! How beautiful!" she cried, and put her face into the very midst of the fresh flowers whose fragrance filled the whole hall. Then, as she raised her head, the bloom upon her own cheeks seeming to have caught the tint of the deep red roses and dark carnations, she heard a startled cry from Miss Cecily, and her face being toward the open doorway, she saw framed in the porch the figure of a man. It was Stretton Wingfield, who had come in the morning instead of the afternoon, thereby disconcerting his maiden aunts to a degree of which he could have had no conception.

CHAPTER II

"MAY I come in?" said Stretton Wingfield, standing on the threshold, smiling with quiet amusement upon the two ladies as he glanced from one to another with quick eyes. Alicia remembered afterwards, though she was not really conscious of it at the time, that his eyes had looked longest upon herself.

It was Miss Agnes who first recovered from her surprise. She went forward a little nervously and took her nephew's hands in her own, drawing him indoors.

"Stretton! my dear Stretton!" Then looking up at him she laughed in her quiet, gentle way, and said simply, "What a fine big fellow you have grown!"

Stretton Wingfield echoed her laugh, quite boyishly, and leaning down kissed the little lady on her forehead.

"Why, Aunt Agnes," he said, "you're looking younger than ever, by Jove you are!"

He turned to Miss Cecily and gave her his kiss also, laughing again, with a whimsical look in his grey eyes, when he saw how she blushed as if she were still a young girl.

"My dear Stretton," said Miss Agnes, "why did you not let us know your train? We should have sent the trap to meet you. And we are so disordered. Pray forgive the confusion. We were so anxious to have

everything just as it should be for your welcome. If we had only known the time of your arrival!"

Both ladies broke into anxious little apologies, but he interrupted them with affectionate bluntness.

"Don't you bother about that, Aunt Agnes. I'm as happy as a cricket to see the old place again. It's like putting the clock back. What, Lion! are you still alive, you old ruffian!" He bent down and fondled the dog's head, but as he did so his eyes rested again on Alicia, who was busy with the flowers.

Miss Cecily saw his glance, and taking Alicia's hand drew her forward.

"Alicia, my dear, this is our nephew," she said, with a quaint touch of old-fashioned formality. "And this, Stretton, is our dear young friend, Miss Frensham. She is the mistress of our little school, and a most successful educationist."

"Indeed!" said Stretton, with just a slightly quizzical elevation of his eyebrows. "That sounds almost alarming!"

The words might have seemed impolite, but for the frank smile with which he met Alicia's eyes. And, again, she might have resented the length of time for which he held her hand, as he made an evident study of her face. But although outwardly self-possessed, Alicia was really excited at this meeting with a man whose book had lain by her bedside for many nights, and whose opinions had recently, to some extent, shaped her character. So that she hardly noticed either his words or his manner.

They were left alone together in the drawing-room for an hour, while the aunts hurriedly completed their domestic arrangements, and Stretton Wingfield's cool, quiet behaviour and his seeming absence of all self-consciousness, or at least of "shyness," to use a simple word, soon put Alicia at her ease. She found herself talking to him in her usual frank, outspoken way.

"How extraordinarily like you are to that portrait of Sir Rupert over there."

Stretton Wingfield strolled over to the picture of a young man in a cavalier costume.

"By Jove, yes! I recognise myself. Heredity's an extraordinary thing. The Wingfield eyes and full under-lip come out even in my delicate little aunts. Look at that Puritan lady. That is Aunt Agnes three centuries ago. I am rather interested in heredity. I once lived with a tribe in Africa of whom the chief, who was still living with his sixty wives, had something like eight hundred descendants—children and grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. It was amazing how the old man had impressed his ugly face upon a whole race as it were."

"Is that really true?" said Alicia.

"Oh, absolutely. But I hope Rupert has not bequeathed me his character as well as his face. He was a weak sort of sensualist, I believe, and a rank egoist, to judge from his diary."

Alicia looked at him gravely.

"I should not think you were weak," she said.

Stretton Wingfield threw her a quick glance, and then laughed with a passing sign of self-consciousness.

"My worthy uncle, the War Minister, thinks I am as unstable as water. That is because I have preferred a wandering life to the conventional career of a party politician, at the heel of the Whip."

"I read something like that in your last book," said Alicia.

"Have you read it?"

He looked at her curiously, as if surprised that she should have read a novel which was not exactly written for young unmarried women.

"What do you think of it?"

"It was very frank and sincere. I admired it immensely."

He coloured and laughed with evident pleasure.

"I am glad you think so. It is frank certainly. I don't know about its being sincere. I am afraid we are none of us sincere nowadays, except by accident, and then we are devilish ashamed of ourselves and make haste to take to cover."

"I am sure you do yourself an injustice," said Alicia quickly. "I should hate to think such things could be written without sincerity. It would be almost wicked."

Stretton Wingfield was startled. This girl did not talk like ordinary women, for he had been so long accustomed to shallow and flippant chit-chat which passes for conversation in modern drawing-rooms that Alicia's candour and truthfulness of expression checked

the levity with which he usually treated women of his own class and race, and reminded him by some strange psychological freak of conversations he had had in uncivilised places with naked black men and women.

He stammered for a moment before he could adjust his mind to this sudden challenge to his real self, before, as it were, he could yet get outside his ordinary pose.

"There is a good deal of the true Ego in that last book of mine, though I believe I exaggerated certain views which I had but felt rather than reasoned out. Coming straight from the Zambesi I was rather like Richard Burton in my desire to shock the orthodox and outrage the conventional. I——"

He pulled himself up and began to question Alicia in a polite, interested way about her own work. She talked of her love for children, and he agreed with her, speaking with a certain tenderness.

"I always feel a little ashamed, and very old, when I play with little children. One regrets one's loss of innocence, and realises how poor a thing is knowledge."

"I feel like that too," said Alicia.

"Ah, no," he answered quickly, smiling at her. "You have not lost the spirit of childhood. I can see that in your eyes."

She lowered her eyes before him, and a sudden sense of alarm at the intimacy of his conversation made her silent.

Later, when in Miss Cecily's bedroom she was asked what she thought of "Mr. Stretton," she hardly knew

what to say, though as a rule her frankness of speech and quickness of decision never left her with any hesitation in answering a question.

"I should say he thinks a good deal, and observes everything," she said after a pause.

"Yes," said Miss Cecily in an anxious voice. "I do trust his quick eyes will not notice the hole in the hall carpet by the fireplace."

Miss Cecily was still excited by the visit of her nephew, and after some trivial talk about his good looks, her disappointment that the trap was not waiting at the station for him, and other such things, she took Alicia's hand and cried a little.

"My dear," she said, "I felt myself blushing when he kissed me. It was so ridiculous, and foolish! But sometimes I forget how old I am. Our life has been so quiet here, and I often do not realise my sixty years. At times I even find myself dreaming the same old dreams of my girlhood—of the lover who would one day take me in his arms and kiss me, as I have never been kissed. And at night I wake up now and then with a vision of a little baby at my breast. . . . Oh, and then I weep for hours when I know that I shall never have the child I used to pray for."

Alicia returned the pressure of Miss Cecily's hand, and her own eyes were filled with moisture.

"This is an old woman's confession, my dear. I say it to you, though I could never say it even to poor Agnes."

Miss Cecily could not have told why she was

prompted to speak of this sacred little secret of hers to Alicia. But between the old maid and the young there was the communion of a great hunger for motherhood and for man's love.

Alicia Frensham did not stay to lunch, though she was pressed to do so by the two ladies. As she walked home to the school-house on the edge of the Green, her thoughts were busy with the remembrance of her conversation with Stretton Wingfield. One of his sentences had strangely moved her, and it came back to her again and again, though in a timid way she shrank from its dangerous sweetness.

"A man of unsettled principles needs the influence of a sincere woman to teach him the way of his true nature." It had sounded almost like an appeal.

CHAPTER III

THE two ladies at Stretton Hall were very happy in the possession of their nephew. There was a sort of rivalry between them for the enjoyment of his company, and if Miss Agnes were busy in the bedroom Miss Cecily would, for example, slip into the library with a glass of cherry brandy and some biscuits for Stretton's lunch; or if Miss Cecily had to go into the village, Miss Agnes would seize the opportunity to take Stretton into the garden to see the herbary, which was her especial pride. They lavished a hundred such little attentions upon him during the day, hardly leaving him alone for ten minutes at a time. Miss Agnes was anxious about his health, for he had sneezed three times after his morning bath, and she insisted that he should put on an undervest which she had knitted for the winter club. Miss Cecily, on the other hand, was more anxious about his state of mind. She had a curious dread lest he should be bored, or *ennuyé* as she called it with a pretty French accent, and she endeavoured to interest him by sending for the newest novels from the village library—none of which he would have read if alone on a desert island—and by asking him all sorts of quaint little questions about his opinions on foreign politics, on the education contro-

versy, the condition of British trade, and other subjects which she believed he was in the habit of discussing. Stretton, who had a sense of humour, was immensely entertained by these efforts to keep him interested, but firmly refused to talk upon any abstract problems with his aunt. But he accepted the affectionate little demonstrations of both the ladies with a good-nature that was very gratifying to himself and put a severe check upon a tongue accustomed to flippancy. He did not resist even when at every opportunity one of his aunts would take hold of his hand and lead him about the house and garden, just as they used to do when he was a small boy in petticoats. It entertained him for at least three days to hear the little confessions which each of them made in turn in private. Miss Agnes, for instance, confided to him that she had lately become very High Church in her views owing to the influence of the new Vicar, Mr. Cartwright, who had strong opinions about Anglican Orders, and the Apostolic Succession.

"I trust you will not think I am departing from the traditions of our family, my dear Stretton," she said timidly, laying her hand upon his arm. "Since the Reformation, of course, we have been staunch Protestants, but on the other hand, as Mr. Cartwright observes, we were all Catholics once."

"Cartwright is evidently a very intelligent man," said Stretton, with a quizzical smile that was lost on Miss Agnes. "Pray believe, my dear Aunt, that I have

no personal objections to the High Church theory. There is a good deal of beauty in it."

"I have asked Mr. Cartwright to dinner to-morrow," said Miss Agnes. "Perhaps, after your wine, you will discuss the subject with him. He is so eloquent and learned that I am sure you will find some compensation for *our* poor conversational powers."

One of Miss Cecily's confidences was upon the same topic. She confessed to Stretton that she had almost quarrelled with "poor Agnes" over her new ritualistic practices.

"I cannot forget that our ancestor, Cuthbert Wingfield, was beheaded on Tower Hill by Bloody Mary."

"But that was not for his faith," said Stretton. "The fellow was a political firebrand. Personally, however, Aunt Cecily, I admire your Puritanism as much as I sympathise with Aunt Agnes's leanings towards mysticism and symbolism. I have a touch of both things in my own character."

"You are so broad-minded, dear Stretton—we women are always partisans."

"That is the strength of womanhood," said Stretton, remembering a sentence in his first novel. "Women's convictions come from their hearts and have the blind inconsistency of a natural law. Men who are ruled more by intellect attain the impartiality and suffer from the weakness which always belongs to unprejudiced minds."

"You are so wise, dear Stretton," said Miss Cecily,

who had hardly grasped the meaning of that ponderous sentence.

Stretton laughed.

"There is no wisdom in that, dear Aunt, it's only an old platitude in new words—a gift which makes the success of a novelist."

At dinner that evening the two ladies left Stretton alone with his wine—the port which Blinkworthy had eventually brought up as a sacred thing from the cellar, having found the key at the bottom of the hall clock, which he had wound up the previous day. It was an excellent wine, and Stretton suddenly found that he was drinking more of it than was quite discreet with his position as a guest at his aunts' house. But it warmed his imagination, and leaning back in his chair as he smoked a cigar he looked round the old dining-room with a feeling of peace and pleasant sentiment. It was strange and yet home-like to be here again, surrounded by portraits of men and women from whose bodies he had got something of his own blood, to be under the same oak beams, to sit at the same oak table, whose dark polished wood had reflected their figures when they had been in the flesh centuries ago. They had been a brave old English family, never rising very high in wealth or rank, never the favourites or the foes of kings, and therefore never falling low after a rebellion, or at the end of a dynasty, but limiting their ambitions to retaining the plot of land which had been given to them in Norman days, and the safeguarding of the family fortunes in a quiet way. Yet the younger

sons had taken their parts pluckily enough in national strife and achievements, and some of them were remembered in history.

Stretton stared across the table at the portrait of Rupert Wingfield, his aunt's Cavalier ancestor, whom Alicia Frensham had pointed out as so like himself. As a boy he had read the old diary in manuscript which Rupert had kept for two years. The aunts had been horrified when they found Stretton deep in it one day, for intermingled with a romantic narrative in which the young Royalist had recorded his early exploits in the Civil Wars, with an evident suggestion of his own heroism, there were passages of extraordinary coarseness and sensuality. Sipping his wine, Stretton pondered over the memory of these family papers, and it struck him with a sudden sense of uneasiness that his own character had certain points of resemblance with the Rupert Wingfield whose face was also strangely like his own. The man had come to a bad end, for after fighting on the King's side during the rebellion he had betrayed a small company of Royalist horse into the hands of the Parliamentarians, thereby saving the family estate from confiscation. Then two years later he had blown out his brains, either remorseful at his treachery or in the delirium of drink to which he had abandoned himself. It was the blackest tale in the history of Stretton Hall, never alluded to by the aunts, with whom the pride of race was a religion.

Stretton pushed the wine away from him with a queer look in his eyes. He knew that there was a

strain of weakness in his blood that tempted him sometimes into a self-indulgence—shocking to his egotism—which in tropical Africa, and once in an island of the Pacific, had betrayed him to deeds he now thrust back into the dark cupboards of his memory. He had ambitions, and he knew he had the gifts by which ambition might be fulfilled—imagination, audacity, oratory. He had come down to Stretton Hall as a quiet retreat in which he might build up the plan of his future life, and think out the moves in a political game, requiring all his imagination and all his audacity, and now for some reason the old Hall had excited his brain with ugly thoughts, and the picture of Rupert Wingfield, smiling down on him with a handsome sensual face, had stirred him strangely.

He took hold of a heavy brass candlestick from the polished table where its candle made a pool of light, and held it up with an unsteady hand to a mirror, peering at the reflection of his white face, which was like the ghost of the Royalist in Lely's portrait on the wall.

"Good Lord!" he said aloud. "Shall I fail because of my blood?"

He stood looking at himself for a minute or two and then returned to the table with a more composed expression.

"I want a woman to keep me straight," he muttered as he put back the candle, and after drinking off another glass of wine left the dining-room to rejoin his aunts.

CHAPTER IV

STRETTON found that Alicia Frensham was with the two ladies, Miss Cecily having sent a note round to the school-house asking her to spend the evening with them. She was dressed in white, and as Stretton went into the room she was bending over some music on the piano with the soft light of the candles on her face. Stretton, with his imagination slightly excited by wine, was startled by the Burne-Jones-like beauty of her tall, thin figure and serious face. He went forward eagerly and took her hand, thanking her for coming as if he had known her longer than one yesterday ago. Had she not been rather unaccustomed to men of his class she might have been embarrassed by this warm greeting, but she accepted it as friendship shown to her for his aunts' sake and smiled back her thanks with frank pleasure.

In a little while the two elderly ladies were singing a duet to the sweet and fragrant melody of Horne's, with the words of "I know a bank where the wild thyme blows." At Stretton's request Miss Agnes played the accompaniment on the rosewood spinet instead of on the modern grand piano, and he smiled to Alicia as the two silvery voices joined in the simple harmony above the tinkling notes of an instrument

which had been played upon by many Wingfield women whose fingers had long lain still.

"How quaint it sounds!" said Stretton in a quiet voice to Alicia, who was sitting near him on a bear-skin rug with her head against the body of the piano. (Stretton learnt afterwards that it was a characteristic of hers to sit on low stools or on the floor.) "It makes me think of old ghosts."

Alicia pointed to a little oval picture of a lady in Georgian dress sitting at the same spinet which the two ladies were now playing.

"That is one of the ghosts," she said in a low tone. "She always reminds me of Miss Cecily with her blue eyes and fair complexion. And the poise of the head is the very same—like a flower on its stalk."

The song ended with a ripple of laughter from both the ladies—as they had laughed with shy pleasure at their own success when they had first sung it forty-five years ago.

These few songs included in their "repertoire," as they called it—a selection of old melodies which they had "practised" every Wednesday evening for many years—were very dear to them, and Miss Cecily used to wonder wistfully whether they would sometimes be permitted to sing "I know a bank" in heaven.

"Do you sing?" said Stretton to Alicia.

"Only in silence," said the schoolmistress.

"How's that?"

"I have no voice, but I would give almost anything to sing well. It is a passionate regret of mine. Some-

times I dream of singing gloriously before a great audience, enchanting both myself and the people with wonderful sound. Even to dream of it is rather comforting."

Stretton responded to her quiet laughter.

"I once enchanted a whole tribe of people," he said. "It was when I was at M'bopo on the Zambesi, where I was the only white man among ten thousand blacks. I was on a mission to the chief to get a trade concession from the old rascal, who was more inclined to give me over to his medicine man for a private Ju-Ju. The night I arrived at the village they had a sing-song after the palaver, and my head fairly ached with the ugly discords. I had a touch of fever on me and was a bit mad, I think. Anyhow, the idea suddenly came to me to teach the black beggars what real music was like, and then hardly knowing what I was about I stood up and began to sing 'La Marseillaise' for all I was worth. I have a pretty powerful baritone, and in the clear, hot African night it must have carried for a mile or two. It was an extraordinary scene. I was standing next to the chief and his best wives, and before me were crowds of niggers all squatted on their hams staring at me with their great glistening eyes. The moon was up and not a breath of wind stirred. Beyond, a forest of rubber trees made a great black belt around us. The intense silence was almost appalling, and the damp heat seemed to clutch at one's throat. But I don't think I ever sang so well. I was excited, and cold thrills ran up and down my spine, but I gave out

the 'Marseillaise' with as much passion, I should say, as when Rouget de Lisle first sang it in '93. The effect was prodigious. At first the black fellows did not move, and I could hear the breath of a thousand throats panting hard like the sound of sleeping animals. Then when I burst out with '*Aux armes, citoyens!*' they stirred uneasily with a kind of fear, and at last when I finished the song, feeling faint with the effort and excitement, they sprang up like demons and waved their spears and shouted themselves hoarse. I thought at first they were going to murder me, but it was only their way of showing enthusiasm. I had to sing again and again, and I gave them all sorts of old ditties, such as 'John Peel' and 'Annie Laurie.' It was not good for a convalescent from blackwater fever, and when I had finished the last verse of 'There is a tavern in the town' I fell into a dead swoon. I was ill for a week after, but the chief's wives nursed me as if I had been the great Bongo himself, and afterwards—I got the trade concession all right from the old man—I found out I was called 'The Man-with-the-God-in-his-Throat,' and I believe the memory of the 'Marseillaise' is still a miracle in the minds of my M'bopo friends."

"My dear boy!" said Miss Agnes anxiously. "What perils you have been through, and I don't suppose you even thought of changing your clothes when they got damp!"

Alicia had listened to the tale with sparkling eyes, and it was to her that Stretton had told it.

"How splendid!" she said. "Oh, how splendid! I would die for the sake of an experience like that."

"Oh, I don't know about that," said Stretton, laughing. "Death is a fool's game in an African forest. I came pretty near death several times, but I was jolly glad to give it the go-by, I can tell you. It loses its glamour when you see men dropping like flies round you—from every hideous disease you can think of. Drink, of course, is the very devil in Africa. The temptation in a hot stifling climate is terrific, and a certain amount of alcohol is absolutely necessary, but it is certain hell to go beyond the limit. Most white men go beyond the limit."

The two ladies shuddered. They were a little shocked by their nephew's forcible language.

"My dear Stretton," said Miss Cecily timidly, "need you use *quite* such strong words?"

"I beg your pardon, Aunt," said Stretton, glancing at Alicia, and glad to see that she did not appear to have been scandalised by his language. "The memories of the old wandering life were too strong for drawing-room descriptions."

"Tell us some more," said Alicia; "I cannot hear enough about life in natural and uncivilised places. It is so good to know more than the narrow little world of society in an English village."

Stretton was flattered by her attentive interest, and launched into other tales of his African experiences. He had the gift of story-telling, and with his imagination excited by the audience of a woman whose per-

sonality moved him strangely, and by the memories of old perils and adventures, his words were vivid and picturesque, and with real eloquence and impressive word-painting he described his nights in African jungles, when he had lain tormented by strange insects, maddened by oppressive heat, panic-stricken by the sounds of wild beasts, haunted by the dark fears of nature and the supernatural, which attack even the most civilised of men against the arguments of time, reason, and common sense, when they have lived with loneliness in great tropical swamps and forests, and have heard tales of awful superstition from natives, who with all their courage and physical strength cower at night from ideas of the terrors that lie lurking in the darkness.

To Alicia Frensham it seemed that the old homely room in which she now sat had dissolved about her, and that she was with Stretton Wingfield in darkest Africa. As his glowing words flowed on it seemed to her that she was really stifling from the moist heat of the tropics, that she also was afraid of horrid spectres conjured up in black men's brains, that the odours of exotic flowers were intoxicating her senses, that the mysterious sounds of an African forest were racking her nerves, so that she was ready to start with fright at the crackling of a twig.

Yet though her intellect was under the spell of his words in a subconscious way, she realised the egotism of the man, and something that was weaker than egotism—mere vanity. For he was always the hero

of his tales: it was his strength, his endurance, his sufferings, his audacity, which he recounted with a striking sense of drama. But though she was not altogether unconscious of this, her own sincerity and natural truthfulness helping her to gauge character very rapidly and acutely, she was not at all repelled, but rather fascinated, by this strong personal touch in Stretton's narrative. It was this which most interested her. She had read many travel books, and knew as much as she wanted to about the climate, the fauna and flora, and other educational facts connected with Central Africa; but the effect of those things upon the imagination and character of the man before her, his psychological experiences, his mastery over black minds, his moral attitude towards the problems of life outside the boundaries of modern civilisation, were enthralling to her. She watched him curiously as he was speaking, noticing the gestures of his thin brown hands, the glint of his grey eyes, the determined expression of the mouth, with its Wingfield lower lip, a little weak and sensuous. Never before in her life had she been so attracted to a man, so full of admiration for a man's vivid intellect and physical charm.

He was now telling a story of a chance encounter with a lioness in a jungle of Uganda.

"I was never so surprised in my life as when I suddenly found myself looking straight into the eyes of the great cat. I was so surprised that for the moment I felt no fear, and I burst into a laugh just as a well-dressed man might laugh if he came full tilt

upon a chimney-sweep round a sharp corner. I almost believe the brute had a sense of humour. At any rate she drew back her upper lip and showed her teeth in a ghastly grin. That put a sudden check upon my mirth, and I felt, I think I was, absolutely paralysed. Then I did a fatal thing, a shameful thing for a man who called himself a sportsman. I turned and bolted! You see I had no weapon with me, and it is not a nice thing to wait until a lioness condescends to make a dinner of one. I could not have gone more than a yard. I suddenly felt as though a cannon ball had hit me in the back, and then I found myself face downwards on the ground with five great claws dug into the flesh of my right arm like red-hot irons."

Miss Agnes interrupted the tale by a little cry.

"Oh, Stretton! How terrible! Why *did* you go to such dangerous places?"

Miss Cecily had grasped Alicia's arm, clutching it in her excitement with almost painful pressure.

Stretton laughed lightly, pleased with the impression he had produced.

"I won't harrow your feelings too much," he said. "I was rescued by the appalling yells of my black boy, which so startled the lioness that she suddenly leapt off my back and bounded away into the undergrowth."

"Thank God! Thank God!" said Miss Agnes fervently, as if she had not felt quite sure whether Stretton had not been actually eaten up on that occasion.

Her nephew took off his jacket and turned up the

sleeve of his shirt, showing his white arm to the shoulder blade.

"Look!" he said, pointing to the marks of the great claws, which were clearly visible. Poor Miss Cecily was rather shocked at this sudden exposure of a man's form, and blushed vividly, though she peered at his arm with an heroic effort to hide her embarrassment. But Alicia, with grave eyes, put her fingers on the man's firm muscles, touching the scars.

"How terribly it must have hurt you!"

"Not so much as you might think at the time," said Stretton, "but afterwards I was delirious with the pain and had my seventh attack of fever. It was after that I came home to recruit, and to clothe myself again in civilisation."

"And I sincerely trust, dear Stretton," said Miss Agnes almost severely, "that you will never go back to such a horrible country."

"No, I don't think I shall, Aunt. One can have enough of Africa and fever. I suppose I shall settle down and go in for the game of politics like my worthy uncle. But after all I should think a lion is a harmless brute compared to an angry M.P."

"Oh, I am sure you would do well to go into the House," said Miss Agnes eagerly. "With your gift of language you would be a brilliant success. Don't you think so, Alicia?"

"Yes, I do," said Alicia earnestly.

"Well, I suppose I should do pretty well in the Talking Shop," said Stretton.

So the evening came to an end, an evening which Alicia remembered in after years as the beginning of a new life. She rose to go, and Stretton said he would take her home.

"That is good of you. But I am not afraid of ghosts, and there are no evil beings of a human kind in Long Stretton."

"I should like a stroll before bed," said Stretton. "It is one of my inflexible principles."

On the garden steps Alicia stayed for a moment with the two ladies.

"I have a piece of news," she said. "David Heath comes down from Oxford to-morrow—with all his honours on his brow."

The ladies ejaculated surprise and pleasure.

"How pleased you will be to see him again!" said Miss Agnes. "He owes such a lot to you."

"I shall always think of him as one of my boys," said Alicia, laughing, "though he is such a giant now!"

She sped down the steps to Stretton, and they went down the dark drive, looking back for a moment at the two figures in the open doorway, through which streamed a flood of yellow light.

"How well the old place looks at night," said Stretton, "especially when the moon sits on its fantastic old chimney pots, and when there is a light behind the oriel window."

"I love it," said Alicia. "It brings out all my sense of romance."

They walked down the village street, which was

solitary and silent. The little stone houses gleamed white in the moonlight, and their tiny window-panes glinted with gold on one side of the street, while on the other there were deep shadows under the gables.

"The place can hardly have changed since Rupert's cavaliers clattered down here at midnight two and a half centuries ago," said Stretton.

"It is wonderful to think, too," said Alicia, "that these are the very houses in which the plague broke out, that in these very rooms whole families died within a week or two."

"It's a gruesome memory," said Stretton. "I wouldn't live in one of those cottages for anything in the world. I am sure I should die of the plague through sheer force of imagination."

They walked silently for a minute or two, then Stretton said—

"What do you think of my aunts?"

Alicia was amused by the abrupt question.

"I think more than I can say. They are the very sweetest women in the world."

"I can't imagine how such an old-fashioned couple could exist in this modern world. They are absolutely early Victorian, and they seem exactly alike to me, except that Aunt Agnes is 'High Church' and Aunt Cecily 'Low Church.' Even that is only a sort of make-believe. They both look out upon the world with the same eyes."

"Oh, no," said Alicia quickly, "there are great differences of character between them. Miss Agnes has

fixed principles of the most unalterable character, and believes in all the old English traditions of religious and moral and social conduct. Miss Cecily, on the other hand, is more imaginative and humanitarian. She has a secret sympathy with heretics and sinners and revolutionaries, though she is not self-conscious of this."

She was thinking of how a girl in the village had "gone wrong," as it is called, and how, Miss Agnes having excommunicated her from all social intercourse, Miss Cecily had often visited the poor girl and supplied her with clothing for the baby, and all sorts of little luxuries. It had been a great secret between Alicia and her, and Miss Agnes had no inkling of a charity which would have seemed to her a scandal. After a moment's hesitation she told Stretton the story quite frankly, but under a pledge of secrecy.

Stretton whistled.

"Well, that is a revelation," he said, laughing. "Bravo, Aunt Cecily!"

They had now arrived at the school-house, an ivy-covered cottage at the end of the village. Alicia stood inside the gate and held out her hand to Stretton.

"I enjoyed your conversation this evening," she said quietly.

Stretton took the girl's hand and held it in his for quite a few moments.

When he spoke there was a curious little thrill in his voice, but his words were an apology.

"It was I who did all the talking. It is so rare to find a willing victim to one's egotism."

Then he turned abruptly as if to go, but stopped to ask a sudden question.

"By the by, who was that man you mentioned to my aunts—David Heath?"

Alicia hesitated for just a second.

"I used to teach him Latin and things before he went to Oxford. He has pulled off an excellent degree, though his father is the blacksmith here."

"Is he a great friend of yours?" said Stretton.

"Yes, the best I have."

Stretton laughed.

"Do not let him have the monopoly of friendship . . . well, good-night!"

He strode back again up the high street, his footsteps resounding with a quick, measured tread upon the pavement. Alicia watched him until he disappeared into the dark shadows, and as she turned and unlocked her little door a sudden flush of colour mounted to her face.

CHAPTER V

STRETTON WINGFIELD was passing next day down a narrow wynd called Plaguê Lane, leading to the open fields, where he intended to go for a slogging walk, when his attention was attracted to the rhythmic beating of an anvil. It came from a wooden shed standing back between two old cottages, and the litter of cart-wheels, iron hoops, agricultural machinery, and scrap iron in the front yard showed that here was the village blacksmith. Stretton stopped and wondered why he was interested curiously in the fact that it was the blacksmith shop. Then he remembered that Alicia's "best friend," David Heath, the man who had just come down from Oxford, was the blacksmith's son. Stretton hesitated, then picking his way over the rubbish heaps, he stood at the open doorway of the shed looking into its half-darkness. The forge was at the far end, and a glow of red light, fanned into sudden spurts of flame as the bellows puffed in and out, revealed the figure of a man who was hammering at the anvil. He was tall and quite young, with a powerful, clear-cut, clean-shaven face, and a square, heavy jaw. A mass of short, dark, and crisp curls covered a head of unusual size, and were thrust back from a broad forehead. The man had taken off his coat and

waistcoat, and had slipped the braces from his shoulders, rolling up the sleeves of his flannel shirt so as to show his giant biceps, which rose and fell as he swung the hammer above his head and brought it down with swift and steady beats upon a glowing piece of iron which hissed out a legion of dancing sparks. With the darkness behind him and around him, and a scarlet glare upon his face and leather apron, he seemed a giant in stature—a youthful Thor forging his thunderbolt. Stretton gazed at him with a sense of admiration which he could never withhold from the sight of muscular strength, listening with fascination to the clanging melody of hammer and anvil, and watching the flight of the savage fire and rising sparks which had always bewitched him as a boy. He could now see who was blowing the bellows—a square-built man with grizzled hair and a rugged face that was a rough-hewn counterpart of the younger man's. Stretton remembered having seen him before—ten years ago. It was Jonathan Heath, who used to shoe the grey horse which Stretton had ridden in his boyhood when staying with the aunts. Then Stretton, letting his eyes wander from the two men, saw that there was another figure in the shed. It was Alicia, sitting on the corner of a carpenter's bench where the shadows were darkest. She was in her black school dress, but now and then the glare from the fire caught her profile and the loop of her hair with a ruddy light. As Stretton became aware of her he had a twinge of stupid jealousy at this David Heath, Oxford man and blacksmith, whom she had

called her "best friend." That scallawag in the flannel shirt and with the wild, unkempt hair! A fellow who had been born in a pigsty and brought up like other village louts! What on earth had such a fellow to do with Oxford? Democracy was a noble and righteous thing, but gentlemen should surely have some privilege of their own. Stretton checked his thoughts with a jerk, remembering that he was a "democrat" himself and a candidate on the people's side in the General Election next month.

David Heath dropped the hammer and laughed as he wiped the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand.

"I feel better after that," he said, filling his chest with a great breath. "By Jove! it's better exercise than rowing."

"My word, laddie," chuckled Jonathan Heath, "you've not let your muscles go slack."

Then Stretton heard Alicia's voice from the darkness.

"I love to see you swinging the hammer, David. It's like old times."

"Ah, Miss Frensham, it's good to be home again, in spite of old Oxford."

There was a thrill in the man's voice which Stretton understood. He knew that vibrating note of emotion, having heard it in his own voice when speaking to some women in the yesterdays of his life.

"No admittance except on business, I presume?"

He stepped inside the shed, taking his hat off. There

was a moment's silence, David Heath and his father staring at him with frank surprise, not recognising in this well-dressed stranger the boy they had known as "the young master at the Hall" ten years ago. Then Alicia came forward with a little cry of pleasure.

"You here, Mr. Wingfield! How nice of you to come."

She turned to the younger man with a note of excitement in her voice.

"David, don't you remember Mr. Wingfield? You must have known each other when you were both boys here."

Stretton was startled for a moment at the way in which the girl assumed a perfect equality between the blacksmith's son and himself, the heir to Stretton Hall. But he held out his hand with a good-natured grace, and found it in a powerful grasp.

"Why, to be sure, it's Stretton Wingfield!" David Heath spoke with cordial gaiety, as one friend to another. Then with sudden self-consciousness he stepped back and said with a shade of deference, "I am glad to see you again, sir."

"I hear you are down from Oxford, David. You've been doing great things, too, I'm told. What college?"

"New," said David.

"Mine was Balliol."

The two men eyed each other, and in a subtle instinctive way they both felt that there was a spirit of antagonism between them, though it was not apparent to the onlookers.

"A funny old place, Oxford," said Stretton, sitting down on a great cart-wheel leaning against the side of the shed. "It seems a lifetime since I came down."

"How long is it?" asked David Heath.

"It's ten years as a matter of fact, but I've seen a good deal since then, which makes me feel pretty ancient."

"You've been a great traveller," said David.

There was a moment's silence, and then Stretton began to talk in his vivid way, monopolising the conversation.

"Oxford is such a young place, the home of eternal childhood. Even the bald-headed old Dons are quite children, and the undergraduates are babies posing as men. They are posing all the time, and each one knows in his heart that he is posing, and that the others know it too. The awful cynicism that is talked in college rooms by youths who are really red-blooded optimists! The morbid ideas that are solemnly put forth by healthy young animals who don't care a damn—saving Miss Frensham's presence—for anything but boating, footer, and flirtation! The great impossible ideas that are inspired by whisky and Craven Mixture! The fearful egotism, the wonderful conceit of these blue-eyed boys who think they know life backwards because they have read the satires of Juvenal and the odes of Horace! Oh, it is beautiful! I look back on those days as Methuselah must have looked back on his childhood."

"Is it quite so bad as that?" said Alicia saucily

from her dark corner. "I have always looked upon Oxford as the training school of politicians and Empire-builders, and of the men who do things in the world."

"So it is," said Stretton, "it's the nursery for the Empire, right enough. But that is because men who have money and influential relations and the things that count for success in life pass through the 'Varsity as a natural, necessary thing, just as they pass through measles and whooping cough and the incidents of childhood. It is not Oxford or Cambridge that makes them Empire-builders or bishops. It is the prerogative of caste, and the law of opportunity *plus* a reasonable share of brains."

"Ah, there's a deal of snobbishness in the world!" said Jonathan Heath, with a sudden blast of his bellows which set the fire glowing again.

"Then you don't believe in a University education?" said Alicia to Stretton.

"Oh, yes. I'm not running down Oxford," said Stretton, laughing a little. "For one thing it teaches a fellow good manners. Not always though. Some of the biggest cads I ever met were 'Varsity men. Still, generally speaking, it turns out a good type of Englishman—clean, physically fit, self-reliant, reserved, common-sense men, insular in their ideas, and with a mass of old traditions and vague illogical prejudices, but very well-meaning, and fairly efficient for all the ordinary business of life. Snobs, every one of them, of course, as Mr. Heath observed just now."

"Well, there is one that is not a snob," said Alicia,

gaily putting her hand on the younger Heath's arm with a gesture of affection that did not pass unnoticed by Stretton Wingfield.

"Now, David, stand up for Oxford like a man. You have not said a word for its honour."

David was sitting on the edge of the anvil swinging the hammer between his legs. His eyes had been on the ground while Stretton was speaking, and his broad forehead was knitted in a very characteristic way of his when he was thinking and listening. At Alicia's words he looked up and smiled, flushing slightly.

"I am not much hand at talking except when I am up for the job."

"I am glad you added that saving clause," said Alicia. "You were Goliath at the Union—though you are called David—and banged your opponents with mighty arguments. Don't think we haven't heard of your exploits!"

Stretton Wingfield could see in Alicia's eyes the almost motherly pride she had in the son of the forge.

David answered her with a flash from his dark eyes in which the glow of the blacksmith's fire seemed to be reflected. Then with a certain ruggedness and rusticity of speech that had not been quite conquered by Oxford culture, he told something of his experiences of 'Varsity life. He had some of the picturesqueness of Stretton's phrases, but he went more to the heart of things. Stretton could guess more than the words revealed. It was evident rather from what he left unsaid than from what he actually observed that he

had had a difficult time, that he had been an outsider, left very much alone in his rooms, and looked upon by the other men in his college as a "half-baked" fellow, a scallawag whose object at the University was to cram hard and strenuously. Probably, however, his reticence, his good-nature, above all, no doubt, his immense physical strength, had gradually won him the respect of men who would have resented the "push" of the ordinary Board School cockney, but were surprised into admiration by this young Goth with country speech and manners. It was evident that there was none of the ordinary priggishness of the self-educated scholar in the blacksmith's son. There was a certain grandeur about his simplicity which seemed to have saved him from the petty jealousies, the rankling resentment of better-dressed, better-mannered men, from envy and imitation, and crude snobbishness, which make the ordinary democrat so objectionable and so self-tormenting among men of higher social caste.

"I went to Oxford to work. Of course, that put me at a disadvantage. Most men go there to play. I don't blame them. From the first I was impressed with the social instincts of the men around me. That taught me more than my books. After all, you know, I could have studied those almost as well in the shed to the tune of father's anvil."

"Ah!" said Stretton, as David came to a full stop with a laugh. "It must have been a revelation to you—the enormous importance in life of friendship and sport and manners. When those same men who shirked

study so light-heartedly take their place in the army or the diplomatic service, or in the Church, their humanity will pull them through without the slightest need of book-learning. They are men; and after all the qualities of manhood, as they are reckoned at Oxford, count for more in the leadership of nations than classical knowledge or advanced mathematics. Don't you agree?"

David nodded. "I'm not disagreeing."

"What do you think is the most valuable thing you have learnt at Oxford?" said Stretton.

David balanced his great hammer in his hand and knotted his brows. He was silent for a minute, then spoke with a certain intensity.

"I reckon the best thing I learned was to understand the instincts of you English gentlemen."

"By Jove!" said Stretton, laughing. "That must have cost you something."

David stared at the forge and was silent again. This lapse into silence was a rather curious characteristic of the man. "They have deep-rooted distrust and hatred of the lower classes," he said, as if arguing the subject out. "It is not because they want to keep us down, or because in a selfish way they want to enjoy all the good things of this life at the expense of the democracy. Some of them do, of course; but with most of them it is because instinctively—they don't argue about it—they are afraid of the stupidity, the greed, and the violence of the people. Most of all because they dislike their manners. Vul-

garity of speech, of dress and behaviour, is more terrible to them than the loss of some of their wealth. To be put on the same level with men who drop their h's, who are 'loud' in their way of talking and dressing, and whose ideas about life are hard and crude and ugly, is a vision they can't abide. Labour members in Parliament and the leaders of the people in other fields of life are hated not so much because of their principles, but because as a rule they are canting prigs and social hunkses. The first thing we must do to bring about socialism and equality is to mend our manners."

"By Gad!" said Stretton Wingfield, "I believe you're right. You have got down to the heart of truth. I suppose I am a gentleman by birth and all that, but I am on the side of the people, because in foreign countries and elsewhere I have been able to brush on one side the differences of an accent, and among naked black people to see the real equality of men and women below all caste and the cut of clothes. That is what most of our insular gentry cannot do."

"Are you on the side of the people?" asked David. Stretton hesitated.

"I will tell you a secret. I shall not be on the Conservative side in the General Election. I am putting up for South Bermondsey."

Alicia uttered a little cry of delight.

"Oh, I am so glad!" she said. "I am so glad!"

There was an excited light in her eyes, and she came across the shed to where Wingfield sat and took his hand to congratulate him.

It was one of those unconventional gestures of hers which distinguished her from all other women Wingfield had known.

"Do your aunts know?" she said, and then she laughed. "Poor dear ladies, it is quite against the family traditions! And your uncle who is in the Cabinet?"

Stretton joined in her laughter.

"I'm afraid there will be a family feud," he said. "Don't tell the aunts. It is still a secret."

"Oh, you may trust us," said Alicia, turning her eyes to David and his father Jonathan. "But I am so glad! I am a democrat to the very heart and bone of me. David and I have talked it out a hundred times."

Stretton smiled at her excitement.

"You are the sort of woman to lead a revolution," he said.

After some lighter conversation, and some slow, deliberate speeches from Jonathan Heath—who shrewdly enough, but without his son's facility of speech, summed up the political situation and gave a forecast of the coming election and the war between the Socialists and Conservatives—Stretton Wingfield left the blacksmith's shed and went for his walk along the village. He had intended to think out his future actions in the political campaign, but his thoughts went back again and again to the conversation in which he had just taken part. Alicia had been silent most of the time, but he had watched her as the firelight played

on her face, and he had noticed her quick changes of expression, the glow of her eyes when David spoke, the look of joy that had crept into them when Stretton had announced his political purpose. She had been silent, but in her silence there was a beauty and eloquence which seemed to put a spell upon Stretton Wingfield, stirring his blood in a way that only a few women had ever done. It had a kind of fragrant sympathy that stole into his senses. Though so spiritual in expression there was a caressing touch in the pressure of her hands and a sense of matronliness about her, indescribable and almost unaccountable, considering how young she was, that appealed strongly to the need that was in him to lean upon a woman, to lean intellectually even more than physically upon a woman's breast. This was not necessarily a sign of weakness in him. Many of the strongest minds, thought Stretton, who was always self-analysing, have needed a woman of true instincts and warm sympathies to give them refreshment and encouragement, and to act as a stimulus as well as to exercise a restraint upon their ambition.

The man halted at a gate, leaning with his arms upon it, and gazing with brooding eyes across the cornfields where the midday sun beat down with a white heat upon the ripening wheat. The air was drowsy with the hum of a myriad insects. From the village came the distant shouts of children, and the clang of the anvil resounded with a faint far-off harmony. But apart from these undisturbing sounds of human work

and life, and the humming orchestra of the insect world, a great silence was upon the land, and Stretton was alone with his soul.

"I must have Alicia," he muttered aloud. "She has taken a hold of me."

Then he thought of David Heath, with his great height, his heavy, rugged face, his dark smouldering eyes, in which there was passion as well as strength. What was the relationship between him and Alicia? Supposing David Heath barred the path between Stretton Wingfield and the woman he desired?

Wingfield in the clear sunlight, and in the haze of heat that shimmered over the yellowing corn, had a sudden vision of the blacksmith's son standing with the great hammer above his head and with the left arm, bent to the shoulder blade, thrust out in front of Alicia. The picture was so vivid in Stretton's brain that he went slightly pale beneath his tanned skin, as if he were really in danger of being smashed to pulp. Then as he realised the falsity of his own fancy he gave an uneasy laugh, and turned away from the gate. He lit a pipe and smoked it as he strolled along the white road back to the village.

CHAPTER VI

THAT night after dinner at Stretton Hall, Wingfield learnt a good deal about the history of Alicia when he sat over his wine with Mr. Cartwright, the Vicar. The dinner itself had amused Stretton. The behaviour of the two aunts was entertaining, for Miss Agnes could not conceal her devotion to "that saint-like man," as she had called him in private to her nephew, and Miss Cecily, though she could never fail to be sweet and charming, was just a little rebellious in spirit against a man whose personality she admired, but whose principles she abhorred. Miss Agnes evidently thought that the Vicar's asceticism, though a holy thing, was to be counteracted by heavy meals when he allowed himself a social dinner. She insisted, in spite of his polite protests, that he should have two serves of roast beef, and would not take a refusal of the jam omelette which she had prepared with her own hands. Miss Cecily, on the other hand, had shown her disapproval of High Church doctrine by crumbling her bread during the Latin grace with which the Vicar had prefaced his meal. To Stretton, who never failed to be interested by any new acquaintance who was not utterly commonplace, the Vicar was a man worth studying, and he kept a check upon his own tongue in

order to listen attentively to the clergyman's conversation.

Cuthbert Cartwright was a man of about forty, with a thin refined face, powerful in its profile, and very handsome but for its weak mouth. He had the rather high-pitched clerical tones of speech, intoning his words almost, with an exaggerated sense of the values of small syllables. He was an Oxford man, of course, and Balliol, too, so that Stretton could quickly find a common ground of conversation, but his self-consciousness was almost painful, and to Stretton, who was in a cynical mood, it seemed that the man was spoiled by the sense of his own saintliness.

From the conversation between Cartwright and his aunt, it was evident to Stretton that the Vicar's ritualistic ideals had made but little headway in Long Stretton. He was lamenting that so few parishioners attended the daily services which he held morning and afternoon. He seemed surprised also that the villagers were so churlish and unfriendly, and even at times—he was bound to say so—impolite; although he had taken occasion to mention the matter in the village school, and privately to the parents, the boys of the place would seldom touch their caps to him.

This reproach against the manners of the village hurt both the ladies, and even Miss Agnes felt it necessary to defend her "dear people."

"I am sure they do not mean to be rude, my dear Mr. Cartwright," she said, flushing a little, "but country people are always slow in making friends. Your

predecessor, poor old Mr. Martin, quite lived among them all his life and they knew all his little ways. He was a family friend of every one of them, and took as much delight in a marriage or a birth as if it had all been his doing. And the amount of sweetstuff he used to buy was really extraordinary. He always had lollipops in his pocket for any small children he might encounter on his morning walks. I often used to tell him it was quite demoralizing. But he was a dear old gentleman, and every soul in the village loved him. I shall never forget the grief of the people—and our grief—when he died.”

“He was a staunch Protestant, of course,” said Miss Cecily, with a little quiver of excitement at her own audacity—“an English clergyman of the good old-fashioned school.”

Cuthbert Cartwright flushed a little uneasily and addressed his answer to Miss Agnes rather than to Miss Cecily.

“Of course those of us who know the sacred meaning of priesthood could not tolerate any such sense of equality between the priest and his people.”

Miss Agnes was silent, but Miss Cecily gave a significant sniff to hint at her disagreement with this axiom.

Stretton smoothed over the situation by launching into a disquisition upon “the eternal priesthood,” illustrated by anecdotes of African witch-doctors to prove that even in savage countries the priest was a man apart from his kind. Cartwright took his arguments

to be in favour of his own claims, but Stretton, who wished him to think so, was secretly amused at the complacency with which the Anglican allowed his office to be compared to the Ju-Ju of tropical tribes.

Stretton's advocacy, however, obtained the clergyman's friendship, and when the two ladies had retired he warmed a little, and became more human over his wine. Stretton turned the conversation towards the social side of the neighbourhood, and after listening to some portrait-studies of retired colonels, country clergymen, and other local gentry, he casually introduced the name of Miss Frensham.

"It is not usual, is it," he said, "for the ordinary village schoolmistress to be as much a lady as Miss Frensham seems? My aunts are great sticklers for gentility, but they have admitted the girl to their friendship."

"She is herself altogether unusual," said the Vicar, after a momentary hesitation, not lost upon the observant Stretton.

"She comes of a strange stock, you know. Her father was Francis Frensham, the Manchester pamphleteer. I don't suppose you remember his name, but twenty years ago he wrote a remarkable series of democratic tracts which attracted a good deal of attention in their time. He was an out-and-out freethinker, or rather a fighting agnostic, and yet I believe much beloved in Manchester for the strength and real nobility of his character. That is one of the problems of life which to me are a mystery. I cannot understand

how a man steeped in pestilential heresies and most dangerous theories can be in private life so praiseworthy and Christ-like."

He paused, expecting Stretton to agree with him; but Wingfield, who was himself an agnostic, avoided a direct answer.

"How about Alicia?" he said. "It was a curious atmosphere for a girl, certainly."

"Her mother died when she was a child, and Francis Frensham devoted himself to her education. She was almost suckled on Socialism—if you will permit the phrase."

"Certainly," said Stretton. "It is expressive."

"And she was brought up in what to all Christian people must seem a lax moral code. Among Frensham's extraordinary and most damnable theories—pray pardon the adjective——"

"Don't mention it," murmured Stretton.

"——was a disbelief in the sacrament of marriage. He was one of the foremost advocates of what we may call perhaps experimental unions."

"It is a good term," said Stretton. "But does Alicia, Miss Frensham, believe in these things? If so, how on earth did my aunts tolerate her as mistress of the village school?"

"That has always been a mystery to me, though there is an explanation of a kind. When Frensham died, leaving his daughter penniless at eighteen years of age, she was adopted by an old school-fellow of your aunts', who recommended her as a teacher when she

had passed through the training-college at Manchester and had qualified as a mistress. I understand your aunts accepted her on that recommendation, knowing nothing of her antecedents, and still being ignorant of her peculiar views. Miss Frensham, with all her high spirits, is very reticent about her private opinions; and wisely so, no doubt. I am bound to say, however, that my conscience is not quite at rest on the matter. Were it not that I believe Miss Frensham has a sincere reverence for the Christian faith, and that I know she teaches the children the Catechism with the most scrupulous care and tenderness, I should have been bound to tell your aunts what I know about her early environment."

"I shouldn't say anything about it if I were you," said Stretton, looking keenly at the Vicar, who was in a state of some excitement.

"I am glad you agree with me," said Mr. Cartwright nervously. "The fact is, Miss Frensham has a disposition—which—I may say—as you have no doubt observed—is singularly sweet and attractive. I have also hopes of winning her over to the blessed truths of Christian Catholicism. I have had many conversations with her on the subject, and she is very sympathetic, though still intellectually obstinate."

"I believe the man is in love with her," thought Stretton. He smoked his cigar thoughtfully for a few moments, and then put an abrupt question.

"How did young David Heath manage to go to Oxford?"

The Vicar flushed hotly.

"Oh, it was one of old Martin's follies—my Lutheran predecessor, you know. He left the lad some money to get him to the University. He had a strong belief in young Heath's abilities. In that, of course, he was justified, because he has taken a very good place, I hear. But the foolishness—the wickedness of it. A blacksmith's son! It is preposterous!"

"And yet," said Stretton deliberately, "Christ was a carpenter's son."

The Vicar could find no answer to these words. They seemed to him singularly wanting in decency.

"Shall we rejoin the ladies?" he said coldly, after a moment's uncomfortable silence, during which Stretton wished weakly that he had not given his tongue the slip.

* * * * *

Stretton Wingfield walked home with Mr. Cartwright after some music in the drawing-room, and parted with him at the Vicarage in a friendly manner, though he was still a little formal and stiff. On the way back he passed the school-house. It was a hot night and a light was showing through the open window, showing that Alicia Frensham had not yet gone to bed. Stretton stopped by the low garden wall and looked into the room, seeing the girl quite clearly bending over the table reading a book with her head resting on the palm of her hand.

A sudden and irresistible desire seized him to talk with her. The Vicar had bored him towards the end

of the evening until he had openly yawned, and even the aunts had tired him with their polite little platitudes. There in the room was a woman whose words were always sincere and thoughtful. He wanted to see the steady look in the brown eyes that were now turned down to the pages of the book. He felt in an excited, nervous mood, irritable with himself and others, and needed the sympathy and the sweetness of such a woman as Alicia, who could understand him. It was late, but the night was very warm and the moon was high. How charming the little cottage looked with the silver light gleaming on its grey stones and filtering through the ivy leaves! How beautiful—yes, beautiful, really—Alicia looked with the candle-light gleaming on her hair, giving it a halo and moulding the face in high light and shadows. With her head bent down and her serious lips, she looked like a saint, like some St. Cecilia in a coloured missal.

He called to her—softly, so as not to frighten her.

“Miss Frensham! Are you there?”

She put up her head suddenly and listened with a startled look. Then she came to the window and looked out.

“Who is there?”

“It is I—Stretton Wingfield.” He laughed quietly. “I have just been seeing the Vicar home. What a man! . . . I say, it’s a lovely night, so warm, and light as day. Do you ever go for a stroll at such an hour?”

“Sometimes,” said Alicia. He could not see her

face now, as it was in front of the light and in the shadow.

"Well, come out for a few minutes."

She hesitated, and then said quietly—

"Very well."

She went away from the window, and after a minute came out of her door with some white lace upon her head.

"Won't your aunts expect you back?" she said, coming towards the gate.

"No, they have gone to bed already, and I often walk about before turning in."

She stood by his side and looked up the road, which wound upwards to the Downs.

"Where shall we walk?" she said.

"Oh, let us get on to the hill where the moon shines," said Stretton. "I love walking in the moonlight."

"All right," said Alicia. "They say there are fairies at night who dance around the dew-ponds. Let us go and see them."

She laughed softly, and Stretton echoed her laugh.

"Oh, I am sure we shall see fairies to-night," he said.

CHAPTER VII

STRETTON and Alicia often looked back in after days to that night walk on the Downs. There are such days and nights in the lives of most of us, which stand apart from all other and commonplace hours; when our souls or spirits, or what other word one may choose, are not quite on the earth, but a little in the clouds; when some prosaic and even ugly environment, a London street, a small restaurant, a railway station, is glorified and made romantic by some intense experience of joy or pain. . . .

The environment in which Alicia and Stretton walked that night was neither prosaic nor ugly. The road up which they went, rather silently and with only light and casual words, was lined on either side by young beech trees, through which the moonlight streamed, making a pattern of Irish lacework upon the white chalky road. From the fields beyond, on either side, came rich country scents of ripening wheat and haystacks, and the incense of poppies, in flower and seed, and the smell of the brown earth. At a turn of the road there was a stone farmhouse, with old barns and sheds in which the shadows lurked; and in the farmyard great yellow carts, with their poles resting on the ground, waited for the dawn and the coming

of the horses. Then higher up a cottage thatched down to the windows stood by the roadside, a solitary thing, far, as it seemed, from the village below.

Alicia spoke of it.

"Surely, if one didn't know the shepherd one would think a witch lived there. Can't you see her coming to the door with blinking eyes and hooked nose, and the black cat arching its back beside her?"

"Yes," said Stretton. "I remember the cottage in fairy-book pictures. It's in the story where the children were put into the cage. The boy was too smart for her—wasn't he?—and put a bone through the bars when she wanted to feel how fat he was."

Towards the end of the road the trees suddenly stopped on either side as if tired of climbing, and the fields ended with them at the foot of the Downs which ran up in undulating waves of close-cropped grass, through which the one road wound to the summit—a piece of white tape on a green cloth. In one of the hollows lay a flock of sheep huddled close together—a vague grey mass. Occasionally one of them bleated faintly, but then there was silence again—an intense brooding silence over the sweeping stretches of pastures which were flooded with the light of the moon, except where there was darkness in the depths of the grass valleys. A dew-pond—one of those pools about the origin of which there is always a certain mystery among country people—had attracted the night mists, and above its still surface there were white, shifting vapours.

"Look!" said Stretton. "It does not need much imagination to turn that mist into a dance of nixies and pixies—the spirits of the pool."

"There is a quaint old legend about that pond," said Alicia. "They say it was once haunted by a White Lady who used to meet wanderers on the Downs, beguiling them towards the pool. She was very beautiful, and men sometimes went mad at the sight of her. By the side of the pool she would put her arms about them, and whoever kissed her kissed death itself."

Stretton pointed to the pool.

"There she is!" he whispered. And truly it seemed for a moment as if the mist circling above the water had taken the shape of a human figure.

At his words Alicia put her hand on his arm as if she were really frightened, as indeed for a moment she was, having a vivid imagination, and to-night for some reason, high-strung nerves.

Then they both laughed like children who have scared each other by some goblin story.

"All old myths and legends have their origin in these natural things," said Stretton. "In Africa I heard many extraordinary tales of devils and spirits; but, analysing them, I could see how they were allegories, as it were, of the phenomena of nature as one finds it in tropical countries, where some of its moods are violent and terrible. In the great forests especially there are all sorts of real and imaginary terrors, poisonous reptiles, and insects, strange and uncanny noises, and a constant sense of unknown dread."

A buck rabbit scuttled across the road before them, bobbing away across the grass; close to them a cricket chirruped with a tick-tick-tick sharp and distinct.

"Listen!" said Stretton. "That is the death-watch of the summer. It is the first warning note that autumn is not far off."

"Yes," said Alicia. "It is curious how in the very harvest time one has a foreboding of the decay of summer. One can smell it—a faint, pungent smell like smoke from greenwood fires. Do you notice it now? I suppose it is from the first corruption of vegetable matter."

"I remember a passage in one of Hawthorne's tales," said Stretton, "which alluded to that feeling and fragrance of autumn. I quoted it in my first book, 'How early,' he says, 'the prophecy of autumn comes! There is no other feeling like what is caused by the faint, doubtful, yet real perception—if it be not rather a foreboding—of the year's decay, so obviously sweet and sad in the same breath,' and then he goes on in his poetical way: 'Did I say there was no feeling like it? Ah, but there is a half-acknowledged melancholy like to this when we stand in the perfected vigour of our life and feel that Time has now given us all his flowers, and that the next work of his never idle fingers must be to steal them one by one away.' It is a charming passage, and awfully true!"

"How can you remember it word for word? That is a thing I can never do," said Alicia wonderingly.

"I have a rather unusual memory—having paid a

good deal of attention to it, as a matter of fact. I believe a good memory is more useful in debates, and often in writing, than creative power. At any rate, it is the next best thing. But as for Hawthorne, I must confess a volume of his tales was one of the few books I had in Uganda, and I read it again and again. I believe I know pages of it by heart."

They were now on the summit of the highest ridge of the Downs, and the great stretch of country lay open before them on either side. It was a wonderful panorama, beautiful as a dream in the dew-cold moonlight. Villages and hamlets could be seen for miles away, marked by spots of white in the luminous shadowland. The woods that crowned the far hills and lay along the village were ink-black, but a clump of trees hiding Long Stretton village down below was touched with light as if snow had fallen on the foliage. Hardly a breath of wind stirred even on the heights, and the pulsating air was warm upon their cheeks.

Alicia put her hand on Stretton's arm again and gave a little gasp.

"Oh!" she said. "How magic! I have never seen such beauty!"

"The world seems asleep," said Stretton, "and we are the only ones awake."

"And yet in the little village there are men and women lying awake with aching hearts, perhaps; I never can forget the awfulness of life even when it is most peaceful and beautiful."

She spoke seriously, with a thrill in her voice. To

some people the silent night acts as a stimulating influence to the most subtle senses, deadening, as it were, the material side of nature and releasing the spirit from its bondage of the flesh. Stretton stole a glance at the woman by his side and saw how her face was transfigured by a spiritual glamour. The white lace had fallen from her hair, and as she stood in the full light of the moon, her face rather pale, her eyes lustrous, her nostrils quivering a little, Stretton was for a moment almost afraid of her, she seemed so cold and saint-like.

"You are the White Lady!" he said in a kind of whisper. Then he said after a pause, with a touch of excitement, though he tried to hide it with a laugh, "I believe I should die if I kissed you!"

Alicia turned to him, smiling, her face flushed with a sudden colour.

"Are you afraid of me?"

She spoke lightly, but dropped her eyes before him.

"No," said Stretton.

He moved towards her and took her hands by the wrists.

"By Jove!" he said, breathing hard, "if I might kiss you I would willingly die."

He drew her towards him, and she yielded, though her face went white again. Then Stretton kissed her on the lips. For a few moments he held the woman in his arms, and then releasing her, except for the hand which he held, he looked into her face and laughed softly.

"Is there any need for me to die?" he asked.

Alicia was trembling, and in her eyes burned strange fires. But she laughed also, and said quietly—

"It is good to be alive."

CHAPTER VIII

THERE was a silence between them. They had become aware of a curious shyness towards each other following their momentary abandonment. It was Stretton who was most self-conscious. He was wondering whether he had been wise in going so far with the girl. He recognised his weakness in allowing the attraction to break down the restraint which he had solemnly imposed upon himself with regard to women beyond the need of sympathy and friendship which was essential to his nature. He was uncomfortably startled by the sudden strength of passion which had intoxicated him for a moment at the very time when the strange spirituality of Alicia had seemed to be his safeguard against the warmth of his own nature. She was not like the women who will take and give a kiss and then forget. He knew even now, and it made him afraid of himself and her, that she would not play light-heartedly with love as a game of interesting sensations which ends with a laugh. She had thrilled him when he held her in his arms, but though she was not cold, her intellect and her serious spirit made it dangerous to light the fires of her heart. These thoughts came to Stretton not in such words or phrases but as an instinct of alarm, and so he was silent, with the warmth of her answering

kiss on his lips. It was a relief to him when, in her frank way, matter-of-fact again, she put the shawl round her head, and suggested returning home as the air was getting chilly now with the creeping up of the valley mists.

"Yes," he said, "you mustn't catch cold, or my aunts will wonder what you have been doing in this warm weather."

They went briskly down the slope, and with the quick movement through the night air their sense of shyness to each other disappeared as they became more in touch with the ordinary levels of life, leaving that dream and vision on the hill. Down the winding path Alicia took Wingfield's hand, and they ran together like boy and girl, laughing as they sent the rabbits scuttling in fright to the undergrowth. They pulled up panting opposite the farm where the fields began.

"What children we are!" said Stretton. "I had no idea there was so much youth in my ancient bones."

"People feel old because they stand on their dignity," said Alicia. "It is better to run without shame."

"You will be a child at eighty," said Stretton. "Lord, how pumped I am!"

He suddenly checked his laugh, and clutching Alicia by the arm, drew her quickly and without ceremony into the shadow of the cart-shed behind them.

"What's the matter?" said Alicia.

"Hush! Don't speak."

He drew her close to him, holding her tightly, and it

was evident from his strong grip that he was really startled. Alicia was more than startled. Stretton's alarm affected her, and not understanding the reason of it, she was in fear of some unknown danger of a terrifying kind. She was frightened also by her own fear, which made her hands cold and numb. She was naturally a brave woman of steady nerve, and this sudden sensation of dread that made her heart thump in a sickening way was something quite new to her experience of life. This psychological adventure was as brief, however, as it was intense; then she guessed the cause of Stretton's action.

A man's footsteps sounded on the road, coming nearer, with a steady tread. Peering out of the darkness she could see a tall figure walking in the moonlight. From the swing of the arms, the long heavy stride, and the poise of his head, she recognised him at once.

"It's David," she said to Stretton. "Let us go to meet him!"

"Good Lord, no!" said Stretton in a whisper. "It would never do for him to see us!"

"Why not?" she asked. She was astonished at this game of hiding from the man who, as she had said, was her best friend.

"Hush!" said Stretton, drawing her back further into the shed.

David Heath was now close to them, and then passed on with his steady tramp. They could see his face clearly in the moonlight which encircled him as he

walked, the strong rugged face, a piece of sculpture with the white light on it, and with deep shadows under the brows. Alicia in the darkness flushed hotly as he went by unconscious of her presence. There seemed something evil and humiliating in this fear of discovery.

When David had turned the bend of the road, Stretton released his hold of Alicia's arm, and taking a breath of relief, laughed softly.

"I say! That was an escape!"

"But why?" said Alicia, "I don't understand. Why should we be afraid of David?"

"My dear girl," said Stretton, "don't you see we have been doing a rather unconventional thing? It wouldn't do for people to know that you have been taking a midnight stroll with me."

"Do you mean to say there is anything wrong in it?"

"Good Lord, no! But you know what the world is. It puts an evil construction upon everything of this sort."

"But David is not the world," said Alicia. "He is quite simple and clean-minded. Besides, I hate secrecy of any kind. The world may know anything I do, whatever they may choose to think."

"Don't be angry," said Stretton.

Alicia laughed and smoothed her hair back.

"I am not angry. Why should I be? You did it for my sake. . . . I suppose I haven't enough caution. But I never like hiding anything—especially from David. I felt mean—and as if I had been doing

something wicked—when he passed without knowing we were near him.”

“It was rather absurd of me,” said Stretton, though in his heart he was profoundly glad that they had not met the blacksmith’s son face to face at that hour of night. “But I confess I am afraid of tattling tongues. Of course, I didn’t know it was your friend Heath until he was close to us. What’s he up to, by the by?”

“Oh, he is fond of solitary walks,” said Alicia. “He often used to start out for a tramp late at night. He used to learn his Latin lessons by heart on such night walks, after I had been through them with him in the evening.”

“What a strange fellow!” said Stretton.

As they went back to the village, meeting no other soul afterwards, Alicia talked of David, and how she had taught him three years ago. She told Stretton of the long talks she used to have with him in the blacksmith’s shop while Jonathan was hammering at his anvil, and in her own cottage where he came to do his lessons with her.

“I am five years older than he is, and it is astonishing what a difference that makes. I always felt like a mother to him.”

Stretton wondered whether David felt like a son to Alicia, but he did not say so. She spoke with enthusiasm of David’s character, explaining how simple he was in the best sense, having no conceit or affectation, but being filled with a great humility in the presence of knowledge. He was not brilliant, it seemed, but plod-

ding and indomitable before difficulties that would have baffled more sprightly minds. He had also a natural gift for language, and his imagination, though of a rather primitive and natural kind, finding its inspiration in his love for the solitude of the woods and in his almost passionate fondness for country life, had, she thought, a kind of Biblical grandeur and strength. Alicia believed this was due partly to the inherited tendencies from generations of Puritan and yeoman forefathers, and partly to the influence of his father Jonathan, who, utterly uncultured in book-learning, had a great store of that simple wisdom and strong natural intelligence which is still to be found among the true-bred stock of English rustics.

"What's the fellow's philosophy?" said Stretton.

Alicia laughed.

"Well, I don't think he has dogmatised to himself. I warned him against that. It doesn't do to begin life with too many settled convictions, does it? But he is a Socialist in politics, and instinctively a Puritan in religion and morality, though broad-minded and open-minded in discussing such things. I was brought up as an agnostic and freethinker, and naturally I am as unorthodox and as much an outlaw in religion as David is naturally Puritanical and conventional. But in our long talks together each of us learned something from the other. I broke down David's narrowness of creed, and I think I broadened his moral outlook; then he taught me to see the beauty of many aspects of Chris-

tian beliefs and law which my father had taught me to regard as utterly absurd."

"What a strange couple of children!" laughed Stretton. "I should love to hear you both discussing the problems of life like two philosophers. 'Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings——' "

"You forget that I am thirty," said Alicia, smiling.

"Thirty!" said Stretton. "What does that matter? You know nothing of the world or of life. I am a hundred and fifty and old enough to be your great-grandfather."

"No doubt I seem very stupid to you," said Alicia with genuine humility. "You have seen and done so much."

"Stupid! I wish I had a grain of your wisdom and goodness."

"Oh, I am not wise or good. I just drift about like a rudderless boat. I want some one to take the helm and to steer me into the right channel."

"Do you?" said Stretton, looking into her eyes. "Do you?"

They had arrived at the school-house gate. The village street beyond was utterly silent and not a light shone in the cottage windows. Long Stretton was asleep.

Stretton shivered.

"It is cold now," he said. "I feel chilled to the marrow."

"I hope you have not caught cold," said Alicia anxiously.

"I can feel a touch of the old fever," said Stretton. "I suppose it was those mists on the hills. Something hot to drink would do me good. No chance of that at the Hall till eight o'clock to-morrow morning!"

Alicia hesitated.

"I could make you a cup of tea or cocoa," she said. "I have a little stove which boils a kettle very quickly."

"I say! That would be splendid. But what would your maid say?"

"Oh, my little maid doesn't sleep here at nights. She comes in at seven to light the fire, and leaves at twelve."

"Do you mean to say you sleep here alone?"

"Yes, why not?"

"It's very plucky of you."

Alicia laughed.

"I am not such a baby as you think."

CHAPTER IX

STRETTON accepted the invitation to midnight tea, though not without a mental struggle of some violence. He felt he was drifting along a dangerous current with this girl. What was to be their port? or would there be a shipwreck? He did not want to hurt this woman's soul. All that was best in him was touched by her chaste virtue and by her simplicity. He knew, as even devils must know if there be any, that he was in the presence of a noble soul. If another woman had invited him into her lonely house at midnight, he would have accepted, or refused, with a light laugh. But now he accepted with anxiety and self-questioning. He had given her a kiss, and she had surrendered without a protest. Yet it was not the surrender of a light woman or a frivolous one. She had blushed, but she had not been ashamed. She would have let him kiss her in the market-place as on the hill-top. He was sure of that, and this candour, this lack of secrecy and self-consciousness, made him afraid. Because, of course, he could not kiss her in the market-place. He could not afford to let the world see him with this woman. He had gone too far already. That kiss counted more with her than with him. To him it had been stolen fruit, infinitely sweet, a moment to remember. To her it was

the seal of a bargain by which she had handed over her heart to him. He could not fail to see that, being quick of imagination and of a subtle instinct. No conventional words of love-making had passed between them, but Stretton understood that Alicia accepted him as her lover. And he needed love. He needed the inspiration, the intimacy of womanhood. Like all men of imagination he felt that life was a barren thing without it, and yet he must have liberty as well as love. Not now at this turn of his life could he afford to fetter himself.

But it was delightful to sit in her little room—such a quaint and dainty place with its low ceiling and polished floor, its little white curtains and rush-bottomed chairs—while Alicia lit the lamp on the gate-legged table, and took the tea-things from the small oak side-board in the corner. A vase full of roses was on the table, and the room smelt sweet with them. On the mantel-board was a portrait of an elderly man with a white beard—her father, thought Stretton—and photographs of small children on either side of a travelling clock which ticked noisily and jerkily, its hands pointing to an hour past midnight. On the hearth-rug as they had gone in a black kitten lay sleeping, but now it followed Alicia about, purring loudly with its tail erect. On the table the book which Alicia had been reading when Stretton had called to her from the garden lay opened with a pressed flower between the leaves to mark the place. Stretton saw with a glance that it was his last novel—*A Social Atom*—and the sight of it gave him more pleasure than when the first copy had

reached him from the printers. There were other books about the room on a set of home-made bookshelves fastened to the wall with cords. When Alicia went into the small kitchen to light the stove, Stretton examined the volumes, as he always did instinctively when left alone in a room with any books about. His eyes roamed along the titles—Macaulay's *History*, Green's *Short History of the English People*, Huxley's *Essays*, Matthew Arnold's *Literature and Dogma*, Lewis's *History and Philosophy*, Mill's *Logic*, *Manuals of Socialism* by Karl Marx, six volumes of the *Philosophie Positive* by Comte, Balzac's novels, Rousseau's *Confessions*, Kipling's *Plain Tales*, *Jungle Books*, and *Departmental Ditties*, a few new novels and a number of children's books and primers.

"Well, I'm blessed!" said Stretton to himself. This was certainly a queer set of books to find in the parlour of a village schoolmistress. They would not have been out of keeping with the character of an elderly blue-stocking with a pinched face and spectacles, but Alicia was so sweet and so curiously simple, so child-like, almost, in her gay moods. She was merry now, enjoying the midnight meal with its sense of adventure.

"I cannot give cake and goodies to unexpected guests," she said, spreading a dainty white cloth before Stretton and laying the tea-things. "Bread and butter must be your fare, sir."

"Dear lady," said Stretton, "I ask nothing better from your hands. I feel like a knight-errant in the castle of an enchanted princess. Surely in a minute

that cat will change into a witch, and I shall be turned into stone for daring to intrude like this."

"Brave knight," said Alicia, pouring out two cups of tea, "fear nothing. It is true that Peterkin is not what he appears to be. His wisdom is profound, but he is also virtuous. I think in former life his spirit must have inhabited the body of a philosopher."

"Now you speak of it I do see a resemblance to Herbert Spencer," said Stretton. "I am reassured. But surely there is a dragon lying in wait outside. No knight receives hospitality like this without having to pay his way by some heroic exploit. Let me prove my prowess, Princess."

"Prove it on this crust of bread," said Alicia. "You are eating nothing."

And so they talked fairy tales to each other like two children who have taken their lunch into a dim barn or into the loft above a nursery. They sat opposite to each other at the little table, yet not so far away that Stretton could not touch Alicia's hand as it lay for a moment on the cloth. He put his own upon it caressingly, and she did not withdraw the hand, but smiled a little about the lips as he went on chatting.

"It is good to be here," said Stretton. "Just you and me together in this little room with the world asleep outside. I shall be sorry when I go into the darkness alone."

"Loneliness is a horrid thing," said Alicia.

"I have been too much alone. Have you ever felt

a dread of yourself when you have realised your loneliness?"

"Yes, often. Sometimes when I have been reading here at night I have suddenly started with terror at the silence and solitude, and have been possessed with a fear of my own soul. It is like being alone in eternity."

"I know that feeling," said Stretton. "It has come on me in tropical forests."

"Oh, but I don't think anything is so lonely as a house in which one is the only living being—that is why I adopted Peterkin. He keeps away the devil that seems to torment a lonely person. You will always find an old maid with a cat."

"Old maid!" said Stretton, smiling. "Come, come, that is not your fate."

"I hope not," said Alicia, and her lips trembled a little as she looked smilingly into Stretton's eyes.

"It shan't be," said Stretton. "I will see to that."

He took her hand and put it to his lips.

"We will keep each other company," he said, "we two lonely mortals."

"Oh, I should be no company for you," said Alicia. "I am so stupid, so ignorant!" But then, before he could utter the protest on his lips, she said eagerly, taking both his hands in hers and clasping them together—

"Do you mean it, Stretton? Do you want me to keep you company in your life?"

"I cannot do without you," said Stretton. "Surely, surely you have seen that."

There was a passionate vibration in his voice that startled himself. He was sincere. By Jove, yes! He could not do without Alicia now. This hour in her room, this intimacy with her in the night, their simple-fanciful talk like that of children, innocent and sweet, the beauty and grace and goodness of the woman which made the room fragrant with her presence, had overpowered his intellectual caution and thrilled his senses and his imagination.

"I am so glad," said Alicia. "I am so glad."

She came to him and, sitting on the floor by his side, put her head upon his knees with her arms around him. She was crying a little, but when Stretton kissed her hair and lifted up her face with both his hands, she smiled with a happiness in her eyes that made her strangely beautiful.

For another hour they talked to each other in low voices. She told Stretton of her former life, of her desire for love, of her craving for an experience of life wider and larger than she could get as the mistress of a village school. She said how good his aunts had been to her, and how happy she had been with the school children, and with the village people, in spite of her occasional despondency, of her growing feeling of being alone in life, and of her longing for other things. And Stretton talked of his former days, of his wanderings, his rather aimless ambitions. But he was going to work now for a definite object. He believed he had

the gifts for a political career. He was going to break from his family traditions by championing the people's cause. He expected to have a big fight at the Election, and looked forward to the fray. If he got in he would become one of the leaders of labour, though he would take an independent line. Some of his college chums, Lord Wallingford and Arthur Champerdowne and Lord Ronald Campbell, were standing also for Labour seats, and they expected to form an independent party of Constitutional democrats or "Individualists," who would hold the balance between the Conservatives and the extreme Socialists.

The hours passed quickly, like a few moments so it seemed to them, but when the clock struck three Alicia got up from the floor with a word of surprise.

"Look!" she said, "it is almost dawn. The light is beginning to creep in. You must go home, Stretton, or your aunts will hear of your mysterious disappearance. They would be dreadfully alarmed."

"By Jove, yes!" said Stretton. "The servants are early risers, too."

Alicia opened the front door and the fresh air of the dawn came in, cool, and exquisite in its fragrance.

"It will be a glorious day," said Alicia.

"It has been a glorious night," said Stretton.

He took Alicia's hands and drew her towards him, kissing her upon the lips. Then without a word he stepped out into the road, and turning once to smile at her as she stood in the doorway, he walked quickly towards Stretton Hall.

Once he got into the shadow of a doorway like a man of guilt, as a farm laborer trudged past in the dim light of the early morning. Afterwards he entered the garden of his aunts' house by the postern gate, and crept upstairs to his bedroom by the side stairs. An ugly creak on the first landing jangled his nerves, and he stood listening with drawn breath and thumping heart. But the Hall was silent and asleep, and he got to his room without disturbing his aunts or the servants. He flung himself on to the bed with his clothes on, and for an hour or more lay awake thinking over what had happened in the night. Then as the early sun streamed into his room he fell asleep.

CHAPTER X

BETWEEN Jonathan Heath and his son David there was a great love. It is not so common a thing as is generally taken for granted—the love between parents and children. More often than not there is an invisible but impassable wall between a father and his sons, often even between a mother and her daughters. They dwell in different worlds though the same house contains them. The father is absorbed in his business, his principles are fixed, his ambitions satisfied or disappointed. The mother watches her children grow, feeds and clothes them, and nurses them, and then one day realises that they no longer need her, that they are anxious indeed for independence and liberty outside her love. The sons are the first to claim this liberty. The wisdom of their father is not their wisdom; his way of life not their way. Often enough the father of a family is lonely, understanding little of what is in the secret hearts of his offspring, and unable to share their thoughts. He is astonished, wounded (though he hides his wound) by the selfishness and ingratitude of youth. After they have tugged against his discipline, after their long stress and fretting against his authority, he is not loth to let them go so that he may be at peace with their mother again, as in the

early days before they were begotten. It is the mother who yearns, and sheds secret tears, when, one by one, the boys and girls depart. It is the almost inevitable tragedy of motherhood.

With Jonathan and David it was different. The blacksmith's wife had died when the boy was still a child, leaving her husband with a sore place in his heart that had never healed, even in fifteen years of silent grief. A man may think while he is hammering hot iron, and while Jonathan was swinging his hammer and blowing the bellows by his forge the spirit of his wife whom he had loved with the whole strength of his soul and body—both body and soul were strong and sturdy—was often about him, enveloping him, as it were, with her presence. He was a religious man, and the prayer which he prayed as he worked seemed to bring his dead wife close to him.

After her going there were many in Long Stretton who urged him to marry again for the boy's sake. But he shook his head—at first he had shaken his fist and sworn violently that he would beat any one who dared to say this thing—and made it known that he would rather the boy died than that he himself should dishonour his late wife by taking another woman to her bed. But David did not suffer as most boys might have done from the loss of a mother whom he remembered as a dream that sometimes caused him to cry out at nights in an anguish of yearning. Jonathan was both mother and father to him. He would not even let a woman come near the cottage—but washed

the small boy himself, put him to bed at night, and twice a day, when it was fine, carried him for long lonely walks on the hills. When he was not sleeping or out of doors, the four-year-old boy played on the floor of the blacksmith's shed, finding the iron hoops and horseshoes, the tools and rubbish of the shop, most excellent and entertaining playthings. He loved the music of the anvil, and was never tired of watching his father at work. People of Long Stretton used to go out of their way to pass the blacksmith's shed and watch young David sitting with his dark curls tousled, with his knees tucked up and his chin resting on them, staring with serious eyes at his father, who was making the anvil ring with a melody that could be heard up on the Downs, and was a cheerful and harmonious accompaniment to the other sounds of village life—the clacking of the mill-wheel, the lowing of the cattle, the bleating of the flocks, the rhythmic beating in the tanyards. Then when the time came when David went to school, Jonathan took him to and fro on fine days and wet, in sleet and rain and snow, changing his boots and clothes when he got damp with the solicitude that could not have been greater in a mother.

When David had learned to read the father shared in the boy's delight in the story-books that were borrowed from the school library. The favourite of these at first were *Grimm's Fairy Tales* and the *Arabian Nights*. After dusk, between teatime and the boy's bed, Jonathan's hammer would be still, and, shutting the door of the shed, the father would bring out his

pipe, and smoke quietly while David read out the old tales, which at last became so familiar that they both knew them almost word for word. Yet still they did not tire of them. Jonathan was a simple-minded and unlettered man, and he was as genuinely interested in and excited by the adventures of Tom Thumb or of Ali Baba as David himself.

"My word!" he would say, pulling out his pipe and puffing out a wreath of smoke. "He was a plucked un, an' no mistake. That robbers' cave was a skeery place, Davy! What comes next, my lad?"

Robinson Crusoe was another book that enchanted these two scholars of the village. David was fourteen years of age when he brought it home. As a rule, Jonathan called "Lights out, Davy" when the church clock struck nine. But on that night, when *Robinson Crusoe* was begun, they were both too absorbed in the adventures and sorrows of the shipwrecked mariner to notice the passing of the hours. David read on and on, until the fire died down, and Jonathan puffed at a pipe that had long gone out. Now and again the father and son interrupted the reading for a few words of comment. Robinson's pious reflections appealed to Jonathan's Puritanism.

"Ah, he was a good man, was Robinson. Doan't you forget, Davy, as he was held up by the love of God. I reckon he'd have gone daft but for that. It's fine to think of that lonely soul going down on his knees out in the open, the same as if he was in church, and praising the Lord for all His mercies."

"But, father," said David, "it's a wonder God didn't save him from being shipwrecked. I don't see why God should suffer such things at all."

"There are but few of us as have any trust in the Lord," said Jonathan. "That's what it comes to. Even Peter came precious near to drowning, though the Lord was at hand."

The birds were beginning to chirrup in the early dawn when at last David drowsed over his book, and Jonathan got up with a startled look.

"'Pon my soul," he cried, "we've forgotten the clock this time! Why, the hours have gone by like minutes! That's what comes o' reading."

He was seriously disturbed by the extraordinary accident, and during the next day rebuked himself for a carelessness with regard to David which would never have happened if the boy's mother had been alive.

The school library took about two years to exhaust, and then it was necessary to make a journey once a week to the town of Castlebridge, where there was a good lending library. This six-mile walk of Jonathan and David on a Saturday afternoon was a weekly joy. It was David who always chose the book, but his father never quarrelled with his choice, having a perfect faith in Davy's judgment. The old Vicar, Cartwright's predecessor, had now taken the boy in hand, after he had left the village school, and in an easy-going way superintended his studies. So after roaming through the library of adventure from Hakluyt's *Voyages* to Stanley's *Darkest Africa*, David found his way into

more difficult paths, and brought home such books as Carlyle's *French Revolution*, John Richard Green's *History of England* and Plutarch's *Lives*. Then he had been seized with a passion for novel reading, and father and son went straight through the best works of Scott, Dickens, and George Eliot. Jonathan was enthralled most by *Adam Bede*. In the character of Adam he recognised something of himself, perhaps, and he chuckled prodigiously over the humours of Mrs. Poyser, whom he found to resemble the landlady of the "Wingfield Arms."

So the years had passed till David was no longer a boy, but a young man, taller, ay, and stronger, than his father. Jonathan had taken care of his body, knowing that in this regard he had no need of advice from the Vicar or village schoolmaster or other learned folk. When David was five years of age he had made him a little hammer and taught him to swing it with regularity and rhythm. Every night he felt the lad's muscles, and glowed with pride as they developed with his growth.

"You'll be a strong man some o' these days, Davy; strong an' straight, I'll warrant."

And true enough, at eighteen David could handle his father's heaviest hammer, and could beat out a horse-shoe into as clear and well-turned a thing as any blacksmith in the countryside. There was health in every fibre of his body, and in his brain, too, for all his reading. Father and son had gone birds'-nesting together and blackberrying. They had explored the hills and

valleys for miles around on long walks, with a hearty meal at each journey's end; they had bathed every summer morning in the river that went sluggishly through the meadows at the bottom of their lane, and Jonathan and David were the names that had been cut into the bark of many trees in the deepest woods.

So, when Alicia had come to Long Stretton as mistress of the village school, David Heath, the blacksmith's son, was a young man distinguished from his fellows both in brain and body. There were other lads of the village who had health and strength, but none had David's inches—six feet two in his stockinged feet—or anything like his great shoulders and straight back, his strong, rugged young face, refined and spiritualised by thoughts and emotions taken from many books. Alicia had been drawn to him at once since her first meeting with him in the old Vicar's study, and the loneliness of her first year in Long Stretton had been made much less lonely by the evenings she spent in the blacksmith's shed with the father and son. To both of them her coming to Long Stretton was a strange and excellent thing, and her friendship was a revelation to them. She had read and thought so much. Her ideas were so fresh and strong, and so candidly expressed. Jonathan was startled and often shocked by her plain speech about the problems of life and by her unconventional, lawless, and even godless views, as he thought, about religion and morality. They had battles royal in the dim shed at night, upon such subjects as free will and the divine inspiration of the old Testa-

ment, authority versus private judgment, religion and ethics, and other subjects not usually discussed in blacksmiths' sheds.

The sweat often poured down Jonathan's brow, and he mopped it with a big handkerchief, in the beginning of this friendship with Alicia. He was no match for her in argument, not being learned in books, and he could only fall back upon his simple faith and sturdy allegiance to the Church Catechism.

"That's a very dangerous young 'ooman, Davy," he said often when she went back to the school-house. "I'm afeard she'll be led into trouble one of these days. She would argue the hoof off of Satan's leg. Pray God she don't unsettle you, my lad."

But David laughed at his father's fears in this direction.

"Miss Alicia is real gold," he said, "whatever her opinions may be."

"Ay, she's a nimble creature, and the lady born," said Jonathan.

Secretly, sturdy democrat as he was, he was flattered at receiving the visits of a young lady in whom he recognised, as English peasants do, unfailingly, the refinement that belongs to the true "quality." And Alicia's gaiety, her wide reading, her vivacity of expression brought a new atmosphere and a new life into his workshop. Gradually he built up a romance, and would lie awake at nights like any mother thinking that perhaps one day there would be "a match" between his son and this young woman. He encouraged

their growing intimacy, and when the Latin lessons began he regarded them as a new step towards the domestic joy which would one day, he hoped, enter the household of his declining years. He saw, though he said nothing, that David had a boyish love for Alicia, which would one day ripen into real passion. That was the first secret between father and son, though only half a secret. David hugged to himself the new glory that had come to him, though it was difficult, living alone with his father, to hide the emotion that exalted him above the commonplace of life. Alicia was quite unconscious of his feelings towards her. In her simple way she mothered him. Often she would put her hand upon his arm, little knowing how he thrilled to her touch. In the evenings when they sat talking she would sit on the floor with her head resting against his chair, or against his knee, not guessing that he prayed God she would not move into another position further away from him. She mended his socks and he kissed them as if they had been sacred things. This boyish sentiment had quickly steadied down into a quieter and stronger way of love. David was a healthy, strong-minded fellow, and did not give rein to fond imaginings after the first mysterious awakening of his young manhood. And Alicia was so practical, so motherly, so utterly unconscious of any sentimental emotion in him that he had stifled this side of his nature as something unworthy of her splendid gift of friendship.

But when the old Vicar, who had been a good friend

to him, died suddenly and peacefully, like an old man who falls into a happy sleep, leaving him a little legacy that he might go to Oxford, David had welcomed this chance of his life with intense and passionate pleasure—though he was characteristically quiet and reserved in the expression of his emotion. He welcomed it as a step up the social ladder by which he would get closer to Alicia. She was so far above him now, but one day, perhaps, if he worked hard and well, he might be less unworthy to declare the great love in his heart.

She had kissed him on the forehead when he went, on the same spot where Jonathan had also kissed his son, and he had gone from her and from his father with tears in his eyes of which he was not ashamed. It was the first time he had left home, though he was now twenty, and it had cost him not a little to tear up his roots. For the first time, perhaps, even he realised the true meaning of his father's love, and as at the carriage window at Castlebridge, Jonathan had crushed his hand in an iron grip and whispered "God bless you, laddie," there was a hard lump in David's throat that prevented speech. But the last thing he had seen when the train went off with him to London was Alicia smiling and waving, and that was the vision that counteracted the first feeling of loneliness and home-sickness which threatened to overwhelm him. Alicia, whom he had known a year, was more in his thoughts than his father who had been his friend for twenty years. . . .

During the three years at Oxford David had written

home once a week to his father and once a month to Alicia. To Jonathan that weekly letter had been the very thing that made life worth living. Though he did not wear his heart on his sleeve, and did not let his neighbours see how much the separation from his son meant to him, his heavy hand always trembled when the village postman gave him his weekly budget.

"Good news from Oxford, I do hope, Jonathan?"

"Ay, Davy's a good lad. He'll not forget his feyther."

With strange self-discipline the blacksmith would not open the letter till the evening when his day's work was done. Then he would read it over slowly, studying every word and phrase of it, and turning from the last sheet to the first to read it again. They were long letters telling every detail of his daily life—a wonderful *Vita Nuova* for a blacksmith's son, and Jonathan himself lived spiritually more in Oxford than at Long Stretton, and as he hammered at a horseshoe he would imagine what David was doing at that precise hour of the clock.

Alicia's monthly letters were of a different character. They dealt not with details so much as with ideas, and in them from month to month she could trace the evolution of David's mind, from crudity to a real culture, from vague youthful wanderings in fresh fields of thought to more fixed and manly convictions, from rash judgments, hasty prejudices, quick enthusiasm, to a wiser doubtfulness, a broader tolerance, a greater cau-

tion. She wrote back, answering and discussing the problems he had raised, in her usually motherly way, imagining herself ever so much his senior. She gave him advice, warned him against taking himself and life seriously, urged him to keep his freedom, to develop his individuality. Once he wrote to her, "I shall never be individual. I am your intellectual offspring." And she had written back at once and angrily, "If you say such stupid things I will never write to you again." In spite of his long letters and their revelations, he was never candid in them, because never once did his pen write the words which would have told the inmost thoughts that moved him. Alicia imagined that he had set out in quest of truth. She believed that he had devoted himself to knowledge for its own sake. In truth, it was not so. Oxford would have been a hell to him, of course, if he had not loved learning, if his imagination had not caught fire in her old halls. But there was only one object before him, to raise himself nearer to the level of Alicia, to win his spurs, as it were, that he might go to her not as common clay. The first two years had gone quietly and patiently with him, and in the vacations he had come home to Jonathan and had revived his old intimacy with Alicia, exactly on the same footing as before. But in the third year he had been conscious of a change in himself. He was no longer patient. He was passionate, with a strong passion that was physical as well as intellectual. As he neared the end of the goal, seeing success, he trembled

lest this should be of no avail in giving him the prize of that success—Alicia herself. Her quiet motherly letters plunged him often into despair and doubt. Would he ever be able to establish a different relationship with her? Did he dare to hope that she should regard him as an equal instead of a protégé? Sometimes he cursed the fortune that had lifted him above the condition of his birth. If he had followed his father as the village blacksmith he might still have worshipped, but would never have dreamt of equality. Once he had written to her a letter in which he gave free rein to his emotion, and confessed what was in his soul regarding her. And then reading it over with a growing feeling of terror at the written words, he had torn up the closely-written sheets and watched them burn. Once also in his rooms he had had a vision of Alicia in the arms of a man that was not himself. He had been half sleeping, and he awoke with a groan that was almost a shout, and then had gulped down whisky to cure a strange feeling of sickness and faintness. These moods were not constant. They seized him only at intervals, between which he took his part in Oxford life, in its sport as well as in its work, with his usual strength of purpose whatever might be on hand. And now here he was home again with more than a village glory on his head—he had his name in the Honour Lists—but with humility in his heart. He had seen Alicia twice, once in the afternoon when Stretton Wingfield had interrupted them, and once in the evening of the following day

when she had sat listening and rather silent, for an hour that had brought back old memories, but was very short. That was the evening of the night when Alicia had gone to the hill-top with Stretton, and David did not know, when he woke fresh to the dawn, that his own destiny had been shaped in the womb of the night.

CHAPTER XI

It was Saturday and the village children were at play. In the old days—how those years at Oxford had drawn a line across his life!—David used to go to Alicia's garden on Saturday morning to mow her small lawn and work with her among the flowers. So to-day, using this old habit as an excuse for a visit, he found himself at her gate.

Alicia was with her roses. She had on her garden gloves and wore a sun-bonnet. As David came in she looked up at the sound of his footsteps, and, plucking a rose, held it out to him.

"That is for a good and worthy scholar," she said, "who is also a gardener. . . . I knew you would come."

She put it into his buttonhole and then laid her hand on his shoulder.

"It's good to have you back, David."

"Did you miss me, then, a little?"

David looked down at her, and he was tempted by the face that smiled up at him. It seemed to him that Alicia had grown in beauty since he had been away, since, even, he had seen her yesterday. There was a soft and gleaming light in her eyes, and a new expression, the glamour of some inward joy, upon her face. David, whose eyes had often rested long upon that

face, so that by its lights and shadows and by the lines about the mouth he knew whether Alicia were tired, or troubled, or peaceful, or gay, saw now that some mood possessed her which was reflected in the pools of her brown eyes. He wondered what that expression meant, and his heart gave a sudden leap at the thought that perhaps it was because of his homecoming.

"I missed you more than I can say. We were always good friends, David, you and I."

Her eyes suddenly moistened, and she turned away to lift a drooping rose. David's heart gave another leap. Great God! then he had not deluded himself with stupid hope! He was prompted to take her hand, in the sight of the village over the gate, and to say some of those things which he had once written and then torn up. But a butcher-boy came whistling up the path with half-a-pound of steak in a basket that would have held a joint, and he was worse than a village.

Alicia herself was startled by the tears that had suddenly filled her eyes. She could not explain her emotion, except that the thought of David's friendship brought back to her mind how blessed she was among women. For now she not only had David as a friend, but Stretton, who had promised her more than friendship. She had not yet got used to that knowledge, or rather the wonder of it kept throbbing at her heart so that for no reason she would have cried or laughed, and one as easily as the other. Indeed, as she took the raw meat from the basket, after drawing off a glove,

she broke into gay tremulous laughter, and to David watching her this was another sign of some unusual excitement, and a question knocked at the door of his heart for an answer. For though he had often heard Alicia laugh at trivial things, she did not laugh at nothing at all—and it was difficult to see the comedy of a piece of meat.

Perhaps she saw that he was puzzled. Meeting his eyes upon her she suddenly blushed. It was the first time he had seen her do so in his presence, and he coloured, too, with a sense of embarrassment that was new to him.

"Come inside, David," she said nervously, after a silence in which they had watched the butcher-boy go out of the gate, gloriously, with the empty basket as a hat. "There are so many things I want to ask you."

He followed her into the sitting-room where she had sat with Stretton until the dawn of that very morning. She looked at the chair in which Stretton had sat, and she moved it on one side, bringing up another for David. Then she took a seat opposite to him and leant forward with her arms on the table.

"What is the next chapter, David? You have done more than I expected. Now what are you going to make of your achievements?"

"It depends on you," said David, and his breath came rather quickly, though he controlled his voice. All his instincts prompted him now to confession, yet he was horribly afraid of himself, of the woman who held his life in her hands. In the room where he had

sat night after night—it seemed not many yesterdays ago—learning Latin with her, it was as if again he was in his old position of pupil to a mistress. She was still above him and beyond him.

“On me?”

“On your advice, I mean,” he said, hating himself for blunting the edge of his first words.

“My advice is simple,” said Alicia. “Go in and win. You have the world before you.”

“The world?” said David, shrugging his shoulders. “It has no need of me.”

“There is only one goal for you—London. When are you going, and what will you do? Aim at something big, David!”

She spoke in her old serious straightforward way.

“I’m not sure that I shan’t stay here. I can make pretty good horseshoes and average ploughshares.”

“David!” she cried out at him.

“I mean it. After all, I might do worse than follow in my father’s footsteps. I should make a harmonious blacksmith.”

“You must hammer at other things than horseshoes,” said Alicia. “We have no room for you in this village.”

“Seriously, I am thinking of my father. He has spared me for these years, but you know how it is between us. I should hate to stride away to selfish ambition, and leave him to grow old alone.”

“You say ‘seriously,’ ” said Alicia. “Don’t talk such nonsense, David! Do you think I don’t know Jonathan

Heath—his pride in you, and in himself? Of course, it will be a wrench to say good-bye again, but do you think he would smoke his pipe in peace if he saw you spoiling your life at his side, knowing that your affection for him was dragging you back from the great work you have been shaped for? Now tell me—do you think *that* would make him happy?”

“No,” said David humbly. “I suppose not.”

“And would you be happy, knowing that the friends you made at Oxford were doing big work while you were blowing a blacksmith’s bellows?”

David did not argue. Of course, she was right, and it was no good posing with Alicia. What he had meant was that unless he could work for her, in what she called “the world,” he would rather knock his brains out with the biggest hammer in his father’s shop. If he could only say so, instead of still hiding the secret that was red hot in his heart! Well, he *would* say so, though not yet—not yet! He must be more sure of his answer. He must see further into her soul before he risked his fate.

“I have an offer to go to London,” he said.

“There now!” cried Alicia, her eyes aflame with gladness. “Tell me, David,” she said eagerly. “Tell me.”

“They have not asked me to be Prime Minister!”

“David!”

Alicia took up an inkpot and threatened his head.

“It is an honour, though,” said David. “I am not sure that I am equal to it.”

"Stuff and nonsense. Tell me—quick!"

"Well, the fact is, the Master of Balliol—whom I fear more than any man alive—has recommended me—the Lord knows why—for the post of Master of the new working-man's settlement at Stepney—Erasmus Hall."

"David!"

Alicia rose from her chair, and looked at her friend with eyes that were full of pride.

"It gives one an opportunity," said David, dropping his eyes, but colouring to the roots of his black hair. Alicia's pleasure and excitement sent the blood tingling through his body.

"Of course, oh, of course! Bravo! Bravo! That will give you plenty of blacksmith's work with men's hearts and souls, and you will shape them well! I have faith in your handicraft, David."

"It will carry me far," said David. His face went white now, and a little sweat broke out on his broad forehead.

"I will do my best if I may still have your faith." His voice thrilled like the string of a 'cello.

Alicia took hold of his coat lapels.

"Oh, David," she said. "I am proud of you. I am proud of having had something to do with you—just a little in the shaping of your mind. May I claim that?"

She spoke wistfully, touched with awe at the thought that she had taught David as a boy, who one day—she was sure of it—would be great.

Her words broke down David's haunting timidity.

But as he touched her hands, which she held frankly out to him in friendship, a sudden little cough at the open window startled him so that his blood ran cold and the passion that had flamed in him turned to anger at this intrusion.

CHAPTER XII

It was Cuthbert Cartwright, the Vicar, who stood in the garden looking in, with what Stretton had spoken of to Alicia as his ecclesiastical smile.

"Oh, Miss Frensham," he said. "Pardon me. I have a case in the village where your help would be most useful. It's poor Mrs. Neale. Bronchitis again, you know."

"Thank you," said Alicia. "I will go this afternoon. It's hard on her with all those children."

The Vicar hesitated.

"May I come in for a few minutes? I see you have David Heath there. I should like to congratulate him."

David cursed him and his desire to congratulate.

"Oh, do come in," said Alicia. "David has been telling me great news. May I make it public, David?"

David grunted with a surliness that surprised Alicia, and she wondered at the scowl on his face. As the Vicar went round to the door she whispered, "Have I been indiscreet?"

"I don't see what interest he has in my private affairs!" said David. Then seeing that she took his displeasure seriously he smoothed the knot from his forehead and made apology.

"Forgive me . . . I'm a brute!"

The Vicar came in, taking off his wide-brimmed hat. He did not shake hands with David, but in his cold polite way, looking at Alicia and avoiding the eyes of her guest, he expressed his gratification that "Mr. Heath had done so well at Oxford." He hesitated again, putting his face forward to smell the flowers.

"I suppose," he said, "that our young friend will not rest on his laurels in Long Stretton?"

David Heath resented that term of "our young friend." His brows lowered over his eyes and his mouth drooped at the corners. Alicia, who had waited to give him a chance of answering, darted a quick glance at him and became a little frightened as to what David might say. But David said nothing, as was his habit, when not in congenial company, having the great gift of silence.

"I have been telling him," said Alicia, "that Long Stretton is proud of him, but must not keep him."

"No," said the Vicar, "we must not keep him."

To himself he thought that the sooner this young bear left the village the better it would be. Through the open window he had seen the clasp of hands, and it had filled him with a sense of alarm and anger. Surely Alicia would not throw herself away on this surly giant. God had destined her for higher things.

He watched Alicia as she moved across the room to chirrup to the linnet which hung in a cage by the window, and the spiritual beauty of the woman, her quiet grace, appealed almost painfully to his imagina-

tion. If only he could make her see the beneficent authority of his Church!

"I hear there is an assistant-mastership vacant at Holmwood School," he said. "If Mr. Heath would accept my influence——"

"Oh, that is kind of you," said Alicia. "But David would never make a schoolmaster. He would never put up with the pettiness of a county boarding school. I am sure he would be rude to the wife of the Head—and that would be fatal to promotion!"

She laughed across at David, and as he met her eyes he joined in her laughter, and thrust back his ill-temper at the Vicar's interruption.

Mr. Cartwright looked straight down his nose at Alicia's last words.

"I was a schoolmaster once, yet I did not realise the pettiness of my life, nor intrigue with the headmaster's lady."

"You must not take me seriously," said Alicia hastily, seeing that she had hurt the Vicar's pride, and always quickly remorseful that she should give pain to any sensitive soul. "There is nothing nobler than teaching. In a humble little way I am a teacher myself, and very, very proud of that. But I meant that David is—too big, too strong in a sense, to deal with boys. I think he would be more successful with men."

The Vicar recovered his equanimity.

"He has a heavy hand, I admit," he said, smiling. "He could knock them into shape."

It was curious how they spoke of David in the third person, as if he was not present in the flesh.

"I hope I shall not use physical force." David, with a deep note of laughter, took part in the conversation for the first time, to the good pleasure of Alicia, who threw him a glance of thanks. Then he told the Vicar of his offer.

Mr. Cartwright was taken aback.

"Master of Erasmus Hall! You!" His surprise broke down his usual courtesy. It seemed to him incredible that the village youth should step straight into such a position. Surely it was rather preposterous.

"It is a great opportunity," said David humbly, speaking to Alicia rather than to the clergyman. "I know that I am hardly equal to the task."

"You were born for it," said Alicia decidedly. "You are the one man in the world for it."

"Accept my congratulations," said the Vicar. So David would not be long in the village! He was glad of that, at any rate.

"Thanks," said David briefly.

The Vicar got up to go, but there was a fresh invasion of Alicia's garden, and the voices of the Wingfield ladies could be heard outside. Alicia darted up and went to the door, and as she opened it David saw that the two ladies were accompanied by Stretton Wingfield.

"My dear," said Miss Agnes in her high, silvery voice, "forgive us this intrusion, we have been down to Jonathan Heath's. Miss Cecily and I wished to ex-

press our pride in dear Mr. David's success. Finding that he had come here, we followed."

As David rose the little lady took his hands and pressed them with gracious affection.

"Well done!" she said; "well done!"

Miss Cecily also uttered her felicitations, though more shyly. "What a handsome young man he is," she thought.

"Mr. Stretton explained what high honours you have carried away from Oxford," said Miss Agnes. "We hardly realised it before. It is a great thing for Long Stretton."

She turned with a little cry of pleasure, seeing the Vicar, and Alicia's small room was noisy with the chatter of the two ladies and with Alicia's own laughter and gaiety.

Stretton Wingfield was the only silent one, for even David found himself obliged to answer the many questions and congratulations of the two ladies. Between Stretton and Alicia there had been a swift glance of greeting and a smile. Then Alicia with heightened colour had dropped her eyes before his and turned nervously to answer Miss Agnes. David had not caught the meeting of eyes, but he noticed that no words passed between Stretton and Alicia, and that indeed Alicia seemed to avoid this visitor. He was glad. He had an instinctive dislike to this well-dressed man of the town.

Stretton, who had put his cap on the table, and had

sat down quietly, chirruping a little to the bird above his head, looked round the room. Every detail of it was familiar to him. But was it possible that he had only left it in the dawn of this very day? What would his aunts and the Vicar and David say if they knew that he had been here through half the night? He smiled at the thought. It was a pretty secret! And he was on the same chair where he had sat for hours with Alicia's head nestled against his knees. His eyes sped swiftly to her. How alluring she looked this morning, flushed with the excitement of her company! It must not be long before they were alone together! Alicia had taught him the meaning of love. He had played with it before, and believed that he possessed it. Now he knew better. Love was not a fitful flame, blowing hot and cold. It was the poetry of the soul, chaste and pure. Alicia had baptised him in a new spirit. What a fool he had been in the past, what a weak passionate fool!

"My dear, how glad you must be to have David back." It was Aunt Cecily speaking in a low voice to Alicia in the window corner. "Yes," said Alicia, "I am glad."

Aunt Cecily patted her on the hand.

"One day you will have a pretty story for us!"

She smiled meaningly and glanced at David, who was talking to Miss Agnes. Alicia followed her glance, and a look of surprise and then of alarm came into her eyes, while a flush of colour swept into her face.

"What nonsense!" she said in a low voice. "How *can* you, Miss Cecily?"

The maiden lady smiled upon her with twinkling eyes.

"We shall see what we shall see!"

Stretton caught some of these words, and guessed at the rest. He could smile now at Aunt Cecily's suspicions. They gave him no twinge of jealousy. On the contrary, he felt a sudden glow of friendship towards David. "Poor devil!" he thought. "Poor devil!"

David was the first to break up the small party, and after renewed congratulations from the company which caused him some embarrassment, he strode out of the cottage. Alicia walked with him to the gate, the others following into the garden to see the flowers and Alicia's beehive.

"You will not be foolish now? You will accept your good fortune?"

She spoke in her usual tone, though Aunt Cecily's words made her feel embarrassed for the first time in David's presence.

"I will take your advice," said David, "now as always."

She gave him her hand at the gate, and he noticed how cold it was.

"I will come to the forge to-morrow," she said. "We will have another talk."

"Yes, do. I want to tell you something else—to-morrow."

There was surprise in her face as she looked up at him.

"Yes?"

Then something in his eyes frightened her, and she turned and ran quickly back to the Wingfields.

CHAPTER XIII

THAT evening David and Jonathan sat talking long over their pipes, talking with long silences between the words. David for the first time spoke of his love for Alicia, of the ambition that had burnt in his heart these three years and more. He had spoken bluntly, hiding his emotion, as men do in these matters, and especially to a father. He had expected some expression of astonishment, but the secret, it seemed, was no secret.

"I knew it, Davy," said Jonathan, blowing out a long puff of smoke. "It's no news to me, lad."

"And what d'you think of it, father? Do you think I'm mad to dream of her?"

Jonathan smoked on for a minute before answering.

"I reckon you *are* mad," he said; then, with just the flicker of a smile, "Love is all madness, for it makes men do things that are above them, beyond their strength as it might be according to the flesh. Now when I first met your mother I remember I carried that anvil across the shed as if it were no more than a feather-weight, while she looked on with wide-open eyes as though 'twere a miracle; and so it was: I could never do it again without two men's help. But that day when she first sat here I did it out of silly

pride in my strength, and that was madness—and love.”

He fell into silence again, and then lit another pipe.

“When you went to Oxford I reckon you lifted heavier weights than most sane men. ’Twas love that partly gave you strength to beat the best brains of England. I knowed it all along, Davy.”

“Does *she* guess?”

“No,” said Jonathan. Then after another pause: “I don’t think she has a notion. Yet all the same she loves you well, does Alicia. When you go to her, lad, she’ll be fair surprised to find that she’s been so ignorant of what was in her all the time. It’s like a bit of iron that has a lot o’ latent heat afore the hammer strikes it.”

“I’m afraid to say anything. I had no idea I was such a coward!”

“Don’t use the word,” said Jonathan. “I hate it.”

“You see, father, if she said no, where should I be? Darkness! It would be the death of me.”

“You’ll be a man whatever happens,” said Jonathan. “I trust you for that, Davy. Don’t fret. No good ever came of *that*! Miss Alicia will not refuse the only man as could give her happiness—and that’s yourself.”

“Ah, you think the world is a ball at *my* feet!” said David, sending a smile over to his father.

“And so ’tis.”

This talk, and his father’s perfect confidence in Alicia’s good sense, as he called it, filled David with

a hopefulness that no doubts could stifle. He felt elated in spirit above the world's clay. His soul sang within him, though he sat smoking quietly as though he had not a seething cauldron in his heart. As the clock struck twelve Jonathan got up and knocked the ashes from his pipe.

"Time to be abed, sonny!"

He held out his hand for a good-night grip. In the earlier days when David was a boy he used to kiss this iron hand when saying good-night, and now after many years something moved him to bend his head and put his lips to it.

"You've been a brave father to me. I owe all I have to you, dad."

Jonathan gripped his son's hand harder.

"We've been good friends, laddie—good friends. God be praised!"

CHAPTER XIV

AN hour after he had gone to bed David put on an old straw hat and went quietly out of doors. If Jonathan heard him he would not be surprised. He generally took a nightly prowl before turning in.

The moon was high again and it was a silver night. David plunged down the lane towards the river and walked quickly along the path that meandered by the bank, sometimes leaving the stream to strike through the heart of an arrow wood, and then returning again to the water's edge. For a time his brain had been hot and excited, but presently the cool night breeze calmed him, and in the silence of the woods, and there in the dim aisle where the moonlight filtered only faintly through the entangled foliage, he regained a peace of soul in which he could think reasonably and normally. After all, his father was right. He must not play the coward. He must be a man whatever happened! And surely Alicia had to-day revealed her heart to him. Surely she was too good to play with a man's soul . . . and she must have seen that *his* soul was subject to her.

He took off his hat and gazed bareheaded down to the bright moon that floated through a drift of snow-clouds in the reflection of the quiet water. He uttered

a secret prayer of thanksgiving to the Fate which had given him such a hope of happiness. He was unworthy of such a blessed life as he would have with Alicia. He knew his own faults—his silent nature, the shyness that checked the slightest outward sign of sentiment, the evidence of peasant up-bringing that no years at Oxford could ever hide away, the inner self-confidence that in spite of shyness gave him a certain intellectual arrogance and pride, a touch of brutality that came out sometimes in moments of passion and ill-temper. But with Alicia he would mould himself into a nobler shape, and he would be humble under her instruction. In the mirror of the stream he saw her face smiling to him, mistily. . . .

David was startled from his thoughts by two figures who came walking slowly along the river's bank, from out the trees which filled an angle made by the sudden bend of the stream. They were walking as country lovers do, with an arm round the other's waist and the girl's head inclining to the shoulder of her lad. David smiled to himself, feeling a kind of friendliness to those two young people who were defying all the laws of village propriety by "walking out" at this hour of the night. They were happy with each other, and the world might sleep or wake for all they cared! Perhaps he and they were the only mortals out of bed in Long Stretton at that time.

He drew back into the darkness of the wood that margined the river path. He of all men at that moment would not disturb the harmony of this lovers' walk!

The couple came nearer, and the moonlight shone full on the faces of Alicia and Stretton Wingfield. Stretton's head was bent down to the woman whose face pressed against his shoulder, and he spoke low words to her.

And to David who saw them, there, passing before him, it was as if hell itself mocked at him.

He uttered the strangled cry of an animal in pain, and staggered back against a bramble bush, grasping the thorns, which pierced his hands.

"What is that?" said Stretton, stopping a moment to listen.

"It sounded like some poor beast caught in a trap," said Alicia. They stayed listening for a few seconds, but hearing nothing more went on again, Alicia pressing closer to Stretton, who had his arm about her.

CHAPTER XV

STRETTON WINGFIELD had overslept himself two mornings running, and his aunts were getting anxious as to his health. They held private consultations on the subject, and agreed that "the poor boy," as they called him, must have been sadly overworked in town. Miss Agnes begged him to go to bed earlier.

"It is not," she said, "that I object to your coming down late to breakfast, dear Stretton—though it is true that Blinkworthy grumbles a little and Mrs. Hibbert is sadly put out by having to cook a second meal. I have told them, however, that as my nephew and guest your comfort must be considered above the usual rules of our household. Believe me, I have no complaint to make on that score. But for your own sake I do venture to remind you that the early hours of the night are always most restful for the brain and body."

"My dear Aunt," said Stretton, who had strolled down at eleven, "I am really tremendously sorry to cause all this trouble. But, you see, habit is stronger than nature, and for years I have never been to bed before one o'clock. I couldn't go to sleep, I assure you."

"My *dear* boy!" said his aunt. "*Surely* you can break yourself of a bad habit?"

"Too old to try," said Stretton good-temperedly. "But I really will endeavour to struggle to bed at a more respectable hour. I know how it must shock your country ways."

"What time did you go to bed last night?" said his aunt. "I did not hear you come upstairs."

Stretton knocked the top off an egg, and sprinkled the yolk with salt. "We don't get eggs like this in town," he said with sudden enthusiasm.

"Ah!" said Miss Agnes, falling into the booby trap. "We country people do have some advantages. I shall never forget an egg I tasted at your father's house thirty years ago. 'Rupert,' I said, sadly impolite I fear, 'this egg has a most *peculiar* flavour!' 'Ah,' said your father, refusing as usual to take *anything* seriously, 'it was laid by a hen of genius, and genius, dear Agnes, as you have so frequently observed regarding myself, is always eccentric!'"

"Poor old governor!" said Stretton. "That was just like him."

He launched his aunt on other conversational topics, away from the inconvenient subject of his late hours. It would never do for her to know that the first glamour of dawn was in the sky when he had unlocked the gate in the garden wall on his way to bed. He had had a perilous encounter at that hour which still made his nerves jump at the thought of it. He had been pouring himself out a glass of port wine in the dining-room as

stealthily as any thief, for fear of disturbing the household, when his hand had knocked against a brass tray, sending it with a clatter to the polished oak floor.

He swore softly, bending to pick the thing up, almost as much panic-stricken as if he were indeed a thief with a fear of penal servitude as a consequence of his carelessness. A moment later the dining-room door creaked and then opened slowly.

"Who's that?" said Stretton, in a quaking voice, expecting to see one of his aunts, and preparing a plausible explanation of his actions.

But it was Blinkworthy. The old man had come down in his night-gown with a poker in his hand. His withered old legs were bare to the knees, and the candle he held high in his other hand, which trembled violently so that the flame flickered to and fro, glistened brightly on his bald head.

"Good Lord, Mr. Stretton!" said the old man. "I thought 'twas a burglar. Whatever be you a-doing?"

"Got a raging toothache," said Stretton, catching hold of a handy lie. "Couldn't bear it any longer, so I came down to get some wine."

"Haven't you been to bed yet?" said Blinkworthy, eyeing him suspiciously.

"No, I've been pacing up and down like a wild beast."

Stretton burst out into a chuckle of laughter and sat back in a chair.

"Blinkworthy, you're the funniest old sight! For

heaven's sake get back to bed, man, and cover up those legs. You'll catch your death of cold."

"Like enough," said the old man severely; "but I had my duty to your aunts, sir."

"Well, don't tell them about this adventure."

"I never keep anything back from them."

Blinkworthy intended to show this young man that his fidelity was not to be tampered with.

"What!" said Stretton. "You'll tell them? Then, by Gad, I'll give them a description of you in your night-gown! You'll never be able to look them in the face again, Blinkworthy!"

"Good Lord, Master Stretton!" said the old man, frightened at this awful threat. "I beg of you not to hold me up to ridicule."

"Ay, and I'll tell Mrs. Hibbert, too."

"Oh, Mr. Stretton, I trust you are joking."

Blinkworthy was now thoroughly alarmed.

"Well, we'll strike a bargain. Don't tell them about my toothache—you know how they would worry, don't you?—and I'll not breathe a word about those bare legs of yours."

The bargain was struck, and Blinkworthy condescended to drink a glass of port. But he insisted that Stretton should precede him upstairs.

He also had grave suspicions of a young man who did not go to bed till the dawn. He wondered whether some village girl . . . well, well, young men who came down from London were not to be trusted from all he had heard tell.

Stretton breathed a sigh of relief when the old man had gone back to his room and shut his door. "I'm glad I frightened him," he thought. "He is sensitive about those legs of his . . . and no wonder in a household of elderly ladies, with strict notions of propriety!"

Stretton had received a solemn wink from him as he brought in the late breakfast. The old fellow was to be trusted, he felt sure, and he was glad of it, because he did not want any awkward discovery which would compromise Alicia. As yet his aunts had not a notion that anything was "going on" between him and their protégée. He must keep the secret at all costs. Even Alicia agreed that it was advisable not to tell the old ladies yet. Though she hated secrecy, she recognised the force of his requests—that with his political campaign in front of him he could not settle down in town with her, or elsewhere, and that until then the ladies should not be confided in. They had all the traditions of caste, and Stretton knew well that with all their graciousness and charming amiability to Alicia, they would never regard her as a match for the heir to Stretton Hall. He hinted this to her, and she did not shirk the truth of it.

"Your aunts are very fond of me, and I love them this side of idolatry. But they do not look upon me as a social equal. Their condescension is sweet and gracious, but it is the old-fashioned idea of *noblesse oblige*. Oh, I know that well, and it does not hurt me in the least; it just amuses me."

Stretton was indeed in an awkward position. His

aunts allowed him three hundred a year, and now, at this important period of his career, he could not afford to relinquish his income.

"I am sometimes afraid I shall offend them by taking the wrong side—in politics," Stretton had told Alicia as they had walked hand-in-hand through the woods last night. "But probably they will not pay much attention to *that*, as they live so much out of the world, and do not understand or pay the slightest attention to the political situation. But we must keep our secret from them, Alicia. It's a wretched thing, but I cannot do without their allowance yet awhile. So we must not risk a quarrel."

This had frightened Alicia.

"Stretton," she said, her hand trembling upon his arm, "do not let me jeopardise your career. Your love is very precious to me. But I would rather—oh, ever so much rather!—have it as a beautiful dream, as a spiritual reality, than that I should drag you down. That would only make me hate myself."

He had soothed her with tender words and brave assurance. There was no question of dragging him down. She had already lifted him up to great heights of joy. In her love the base metal of his nature had been transmuted into something nearer gold. For the first time in his life, he told her, he felt that there was something higher than self-seeking. The scales had fallen from his eyes when they had met her shining vision, and he had seen, now, that ambition was a poor

sordid thing unless its object was to serve a cause or a nation with self-sacrifice.

"You shall be my inspiration, my Egeria," he had said, his imagination aglow with an enthusiasm that was new to him, and with a sincerity to which he yielded with a passionate pleasure, finding an infinite refreshment and hopefulness in having, for once check-mated the little devils who had so often sat grinning in his soul when he had been moved by sentiment. "I do not speak idly, Alicia, or indulge in high-falutin phrases of old love tales" (in this he deceived himself a little, for his language was exotic at times and echoed the Elizabethan poets), "but you are now my North Star, and without you I should go astray across the dark waters."

Alicia had in her simple way gone back to the practical point of their argument.

"I am not one of those women," she said, "who think that marriage must always be the condition of love. There would be more love in the world, and happier women, if men were not bound down at once by legal documents and religious ceremony. That is mere selfishness on the women's part. It is not right that they should spoil a man's career because they are impatient at once for home life, beautiful vision as it is to us lonely ones. If you leave me for ten years, Stretton, I will wait, and wait ever so patiently, so long as I know that our souls have not been separated."

"It's dangerous doctrine," said Stretton honestly, though her words eased him of a growing anxiety.

"Most men need binding down. We are such selfish and careless brutes. You see the woman who allows her lover liberty is herself bound down . . . if they have been intimate in love."

"How?" said Alicia.

"What if she has children?"

"Oh, then," said Alicia eagerly, "then surely she can be more patient in waiting. Then, indeed, it is not waiting, but the most precious possession."

"But why should there be any waiting . . . any separation? Why not marriage in the normal way?"

Stretton put this question bluntly, though inwardly he was afraid of the subject. But he must sound the depths of Alicia's soul. This was a problem in which they were both vitally interested, and there must be no disguise.

"Surely there are many cases," said Alicia quietly, "where the man must not be fettered too soon by the ties of domestic life. Perhaps he is a soldier who is ordered abroad, or a traveller who is called into wild places. Perhaps he has to keep a father or a mother whom he has no right to desert in the loneliness of their old age. Perhaps he is a writer who needs solitude to find his genius. Then . . . there is your own case."

"Ah!" said Stretton thoughtfully, "there is my own case."

To himself he thought, "Good God! how the woman gives herself into my hands!" And, though it made his path smooth before him, he had a secret loathing for himself for not resisting her arguments. In all

honour he should guard her against herself. He was silent, utterly perplexed by Alicia's philosophy of life, by his own secret consciousness that it was a false and dangerous philosophy . . . however sweet, however convenient to his own career.

Alicia laughed shyly, becoming self-conscious after an argument which had been mainly theoretical to her, though not to him.

"Why should you cross-question me like any devil's advocate? I am merely quoting your own opinions as you put them in your last book. Have you forgotten that?"

"I wrote many foolish things in that utterly stupid novel."

Stretton spoke almost savagely. The truth was that Alicia's words had disconcerted him in an extraordinary way. The sins of passion, done in mere passion, seemed to him more decent and respectable than this philosophy calmly preached by a pure woman. He saw it in all its hideousness, knowing men and his own soul better than Alicia did, who was ignorant of both. Yes, he had written such things in his novel, and now he saw his frightful insincerity. The temptation of the devil himself could not be more appalling than the easy way of betrayal offered to him in all purity by the most chaste woman he had ever known.

Who could resist the seductive sweetness? Not Stretton Wingfield, who had never made a habit of resisting.

Alicia asked what time he would be at her cottage that evening.

"Do you think I ought to come?" said Stretton, knowing in his heart that whether he ought or ought not, he could not keep away from the house where he had played knight-errant to Alicia's fairy princess.

"Why not?" said Alicia in surprise, and then added quickly, "Oh . . . I am selfish. . . . You have work to do, and I cannot have you every night."

"Good heavens, no!" said Stretton. "I shall do no work while I am down here. . . . But . . . I am afraid of compromising you."

"Yes," said Alicia. "We must be careful for your sake. But after twelve there is no risk. Every soul in the place is snoring by that time."

"But is it right?" said Stretton. "Is it *right*, my love?"

"If I am your love, it is right, Stretton," said Alicia quietly. She leant her head upon his shoulder. "You do not want me to doubt your love?" she asked, as though she could doubt that the moon were above them—though its light lapped their feet—rather than Stretton's sincerity.

He answered her with low and passionate words. It was then that they had been startled by the strange noise in the wood which Alicia had said was the cry of an animal caught in a trap.

CHAPTER XVI

THAT afternoon, after the children had left school and when Alicia was home again sitting at her lonely tea, there came a knock at the door. She knew it was not David, though she had half expected him, because he used the knocker with a hammer-and-anvil stroke, which could not be mistaken. Her thoughts flew to Stretton. "How rash! How rash of him!" she whispered, seeing that it was still some hours before the darkness, when he might come to her without fear of village gossip. But when she went to the door it was not Stretton, but the Vicar. He did not often come to her cottage, except when there was sickness in the village and he needed her help. This, no doubt, was the explanation of his visit now, and she asked him who was ill.

"No one," he said, somewhat nervously, she thought, glancing past her into the room, "unless it is myself," he added.

"Are you unwell?" asked Alicia, with quick concern. "Can I do anything for you?"

"Perhaps you can."

Then he said with more composure, taking a seat while she still stood, "There is nothing much the matter with me. I am a little overwrought, that is all." He

passed a thin hand over his high forehead. "It is so refreshing to have a quiet talk with you now and again. My conversation is chiefly restricted to inquiring into old women's ailments or listening to the domestic grievances of ignorant yokels. 'Parish poking' is not the most intellectual of pursuits."

"No," said Alicia. "I often marvel at your patience."

"Not that I complain, God forbid! I try to do my duty by my poor people. But you understand, to a man who has some reminiscences of scholarship and has a larger life in the past, the society of village folk is not altogether soul-satisfying!"

Alicia could understand. She also fretted sometimes against the narrow cage of life.

"Of course, it has its value," said the Vicar, speaking, as usual, a monologue rather than taking part in a conversation. "It thrusts a man back upon himself and enables him to live the inner life. Even the pagan Marcus Aurelius saw, as well as Thomas à Kempis, that the empire of the soul was of more importance than the pomp and vanity of the court or the dominion of the world. After all, we who live in the village have opportunities denied to those who are in the whirlpool of great cities. They rub shoulders with many people and fritter away their time in small pleasures and small talk, but we, in solitude, may learn at least to know ourselves, and the human heart which is in us. That is the deeper knowledge, and most profitable."

Alicia smiled to herself at his inconsistency—beginning with a grievance and ending with self-satisfaction.

She wondered, too, why he should come to plunge into a philosophical discussion in this unusual way. She glanced at the clock. It would be awkward if Stretton came before his time!

But argument was a weakness with her, and she took up his challenge.

"I am not sure that those who live in solitude, as you say, do know their own soul, or, if so, whether it is worth knowing. Self-consciousness so often breeds a morbid view of things, and even the peace which comes from cultivating 'the inner life' may often be self-complacency at one's virtues and narrow principles."

"Do you think so?" said the Vicar, shifting in his seat uneasily, as if her words had stung him a little.

"Well," said Alicia, less dogmatically, "I am personally so ignorant of the world, of humanity in crowded places, that I would barter some of my solitude for a wider experience. One needs, I think, to be jostled and elbowed before retiring into the desert. I do not agree with the hermit ideal. Some of the saints seem to me to have been so anxious to know their own souls that they were utterly careless of other people's needs! Oh, I am sure solitude is an overrated thing!"

"Then you agree that it is not good for man to live alone?"

The Vicar leant forward and spoke eagerly, as if some issue of his own fate hung upon her answer.

Alicia laughed, not noticing his anxious look.

"I am sure it is not good for women to live alone."

"Ah!" said the Vicar.

He sank back in his chair and his eyes studied the carpet, as if searching for something.

"There was a time," he went on seriously, "when I believed firmly in the ideal of a celibate clergy. As an Anglican, I held that a priest should live solitary without the cares of wife and children—without the joys of home-life—devoting himself solely to the cause of his Church and to the service of God.

"It is a false ideal," said Alicia in her decided way. "No man should be denied his manhood. To bring children into the world is God's law to humanity. No man or woman has lived a whole and complete life until he, or she, has obeyed this natural and divine command. I believe that with absolute faith!"

The Vicar searched her face with his eyes, and into his own eyes there leapt a sudden look of hunger and appeal.

He flushed deeply and then became paler than usual. It was evident to Alicia that he was strangely excited, and a thought that flashed into her mind caused her a sudden panic.

"Perhaps," said the Vicar, twisting his hands nervously, "perhaps you rather wonder at my visit to-night. I came to ask you something that for many weeks I have been urged to ask."

"What is that, Mr. Cartwright?" said Alicia, now thoroughly scared by his manner and words.

"I ask you to be my wife," said the Vicar. "I can-

not conceal my love for you. It is a passion that is a torture to me."

Alicia rose and dropped her needlework. There was a hint of anger and even of scorn in her voice as she answered him.

"It is a strange confession of love—that it tortures you!"

The Vicar held out his hand with a gesture of appeal that touched her a little.

"Pray do not misunderstand me. When I say that my love for you is a torture, I mean that it has caused me a severe spiritual conflict. I recognise now that my ideals of celibacy are, as you say, false ideals, and the struggle between a new revelation and old convictions is always painful. I beg you to believe, Miss Alicia, that I love you with a single and pure heart."

Alicia was utterly perplexed as to a reply.

"I like to be loved," she said at last, simply enough. "I have had too little love in my life . . . but . . . I cannot be your wife, Mr. Cartwright."

He did not seem to heed her, but went on talking with his eyes studying the carpet again.

"I believe we should be very happy together. I would endeavour to make you happy, and you would be a good clergyman's wife. I have every confidence that you would share my labours. Perhaps you still have some doubts about the fundamental truths of Christianity. I would remove them."

Alicia smiled at this characteristic speech. In her rather hysterical mood, startled as she was by this

extraordinary interview, she had to hold herself in check to prevent the laughter or the tears that would have given her relief.

"You are very good . . . but I really cannot be your wife," she said, almost as if she were refusing some favour to a child.

"Faith, after all," said the Vicar, "is a matter of the will rather than of the intellect, and simple and sincere belief is not incompatible with vague doubts and intellectual difficulties."

He paused, looking at Alicia, and for the first time he seemed to realise that she had refused him.

"Good heavens!" he said in a strangled voice. "If you do not love me . . . will you not have pity on me? This passion consumes me. I am in hell!"

"Oh, I am sorry!" said Alicia, filled now with utter dismay at the abject figure of the man who until to-day had seemed to her so cold and self-contained, passionless, if any man were so.

Then her own self-restraint and the knowledge that such weakness was not to be pitied steadied her.

"Mr. Cartwright," she said quietly, "this passion you talk of is not true love—it cannot be. You say you love me—yet you know nothing of what I am. There is nothing in common between us—nothing!"

"I have watched you every day for three years," said the Vicar more quietly, "and I know you are the only woman in the world for me."

"There are other women," said Alicia.

He smiled wretchedly.

"I thought yesterday that God had sent us both to Long Stretton for a purpose. I believed that we were destined for each other. Now you ask me to believe that He has sported cruelly with my soul."

"I don't ask you to believe any such thing," said Alicia. "I do not believe God is so much concerned with you."

She was sorry immediately for her words, which were more cruel than she had meant.

He paled and swayed a little as if he had been stabbed. Then he groped for his hat and went towards the door.

"I see," he said bitterly. "David Heath has been before me."

He went out and closed the door quietly. All his self-control had returned to him.

Alicia, standing as he had left her by the side of the table, put her hands to her temples, her face flushing scarlet.

"David!" she said in a whisper. "Do they think *that*?"

CHAPTER XVII

ALICIA called that evening at the forge, as she had promised, but David Heath was out.

Jonathan met her at the door.

"I can't think what's come over the lad," he said with a worried look, twisting his leather apron nervously.

"Do *you* happen to know?" he said, throwing her a keen glance from under his rugged eyebrows.

"I?"

Alicia was surprised. She pondered for a moment, and then flushed uneasily as certain vague thoughts crept out of their hiding places and confronted her with a sudden fear.

"How should I know?" she added, with just a hint of temper. "What is the matter with him?"

"The Lord knows! I can't get a word from him. He went out late last night—you know his habit—and came home as I was just rising—in the dawn. He looked scared as if he'd seen a sperrit. When I asked him he said, 'Yes—I've been walking wi' ghosts, feyther,' and laughed so that I saw something was wrong. I thought p'r'aps you might know summat."

He eyed her keenly, almost angrily, and Alicia saw that he suspected her of something. She groped her

way back to yesterday, wondering if she had said anything to hurt David in the afternoon.

Then she looked honestly at Jonathan, and he could not doubt the truth in her eyes.

"I have said nothing—done nothing. How could I? You know my love for David?"

"Ah!" Jonathan looked down at the white dust in the roadway. He was utterly perplexed. If Alicia loved the lad, what was ado with him, then? What had happened in the night that had sent him home with a white haggard face and despairing eyes?

It was the most frightful shock that Jonathan had had in his life since his wife died in his arms. Getting out of bed at five o'clock, as was his habit in the summer, and throwing back the window curtain to let in the fresh morning air, he had heard a stumbling step on the stairs, and turning, saw his son standing in the doorway. His boots and leggings were white with dust, and his black hair was in wild disorder over a face of deathly pallor.

"David!" said Jonathan, awakening to a sense of horror, knowing swiftly and instinctively that he was in the presence of some grave catastrophe. "David! . . . What's the matter? where've you been?"

David gave a short grim laugh.

"I've been in hell, father."

He passed a trembling hand over his face, and sat down heavily on a bedroom chair. "Don't ask me, father," he said in a tone of infinite weariness. "I'll

tell you another time. I've been walking with ghosts this night." He laughed again, weakly.

"I'm a bit mad, and that's a fact; I've got no pluck. . . . I'm an infernal weakling."

Jonathan endeavoured to get at the truth in a round-about way, but to no purpose. David talked of having kept company with the devil, which was vague and not illuminating. Then Jonathan put an abrupt question.

"Have you spoken to Alicia?"

The words roused David into a sudden passion.

"Don't, father!" he said, springing up and pacing the floor with drunken steps. "For God's sake! Don't mention her! D'ye hear, father? If you'd have me keep sane, don't speak of her. Oh. . . . Curse him! Curse him!"

"Him! What him?" said Jonathan. Then with a sudden anger, though he was a patient man, he said, "Have you been drinking, that you treat me like this?"

"Yes, drinking poison, all through this cursed night!"

Jonathan was silent. He believed his son to be fever-stricken.

"I'll get you some coffee," he said simply.

He went downstairs to the kitchen, and by some strange psychological freak the ticking of the grandfather's clock brought back the memory of the night when his wife had lain upstairs dead and he had warmed some milk here for the child who lay sleeping quietly in his cradle. Superstitious as all countrymen are, Jonathan wondered with a numb terror if David

now were going to die. He stood listening, but there was not a movement in the bedroom, and only the ticking of the clock sounded, with an unusual noise, in the cottage. Its steady beat excited the blacksmith's nerves, and he strode towards the old grandfather, and fumbling the case open, stopped the pendulum. This brought him a curious sense of relief, and he went quietly to work to brew the coffee.

David would tell him in good time. He would not fret the lad. Quietly he went upstairs again with the coffee and some bread and butter.

"You'll be famished," he said. "Warm yourself with this drink."

David drank his coffee, and it brought a more healthy colour into his face again.

"Thanks, father."

Jonathan left him alone, and went to the forge according to his usual habit. Work brought relief to his anxiety, steadying his nerves. Muscular exercise is the best antidote to an aching heart, and as Jonathan swung his hammer, getting into a glow of heat, he grew more cheerful. After all David was not much more than a boy, and in youth the mind, though easily depressed, soon recovers its normal poise. And he was a good healthy lad; there was no bad blood in him, thank God! At midday the father and son ate their dinner almost silently. David was gloomy, but his natural appetite asserted itself, and he made a square meal, to the secret joy of his father, who watched each mouthful with increasing satisfaction. Whatever was

on David's mind had not affected his body . . . which was something to be thankful for. In the afternoon David shut himself up in his room—his own little den which he had had to himself since childhood, and where the first books he had read as a child were ranged by the side of his student books. In the evening he went out after a casual word or two.

“Don't sit up for me, father.”

All Jonathan's anxiety was revived at the thought of his son wandering again on the Downs or in the lonely woods, wandering with a brain that some blow from without or within had put out of gear.

“You'll not be long, lad?” There was a touch of fear in his voice that made David's eyes lose something of their gloomy retrospective despair.

“Don't be scared for me, father. I must walk this humour off. I'm making a fool of myself, I know; but there it is, I can't help it to-day. To-morrow——”

He laughed, as if to-morrow all would be well with the world and God in His heaven—but at the end of the laugh there was something like a sob in his throat, and Jonathan knew that David was receiving a baptism of pain. Going back to the forge he groaned aloud, and then prayed inarticulately that his son might pass through the fire unscorched.

When Alicia had come that evening he was tempted to confide in her. After his first suspicion he regained his old faith in her love for David and in her womanly wisdom. But Alicia denied him the opportunity. Her

face was rather cold, and she turned with a word of farewell.

“I must be going back. I hope there is nothing much the matter with David.”

Jonathan watched her down the lane, and then went back with a shake of the head to his workshop.

CHAPTER XVIII

DAVID wrestled with himself on the lonely Downs. For twenty-four hours now he had been in agony of spirit, and hardly sane. That sudden vision of Alicia and Stretton Wingfield had snapped something in his brain. He had passed from blind passion to weak tears, tears that moistened the turf upon which he had thrown himself under the stars. Then he had got up numb and cold, walking again with blank despair. This, then, was the end of all his work! He had been robbed of his love by a stranger, who, in three days, had won easily what he, David, had struggled for and lived for during three years at Oxford, and dreamed of since his boyhood. At times a doubt that perhaps he had been mistaken, that perhaps in the half-darkness he had seen wrongly, tortured him afresh because it revived a hope which in his inner consciousness he knew to be false. Perhaps his excited imagination had given him a stupid vision. Good God! what a fool he would be. . . . But no! He had seen clearly in the moonlight Alicia's arm around the man's waist, her head against his shoulder. He had seen more than that . . . the look of happiness and love upon her face as it was raised upwards with the pale light on it. There could be no doubt, unless he had been mad.

He must struggle to face this new fact which had wiped out his old self. Without Alicia as part of his scheme of life he was no longer himself. He was a new man, a stranger with whom he had no acquaintance. He must get to know this unknown. He must work out some new scheme . . . without Alicia. He must at least play the man. He must master the frightful weakness of passion that was tearing at him and sapping him. In the midst of his abandonment he was ashamed. It was not right for any man to have been so subject to woman's mind, to be the slave even of love. It was not right! It was utterly and damnably wrong!

So he argued and fought with himself, incoherently, at times rather madly, and walking as though bewitched, in order to get a grip over the machine, to steady his brain down to a normal pace.

He must have walked thirty miles, tramping on without a thought of his whereabouts, stumbling down the hollows of the Downs, staggering up to the hills, and striding along their heights like a hag-ridden creature. Twice he passed through a village where not a light glimmered in its windows, though once a blind was drawn and a white face pressed against the window pane to watch his dark figure pass down the street with thudding footsteps. It was in the grey dawn when, with damp hair, and wet with dew to the knees, he came back again to Long Stretton. And then Fate, or God, or perhaps the Spirit of Evil—who shall say which or what?—brought him face to face with the one fact

which, by this time, he had thrust, as a horrid thought to be forgotten, into the dungeons of his brain.

He passed Alicia's cottage at the corner of the lane leading to his father's shed, or rather he reached it without passing. At the very moment, as in his weakness, which he had not quite conquered, he shuddered ever so slightly when his eyes rested on the small house with the garden of flowers, which sent a belt of fragrance across the road, the door opened, and Alicia herself stood under the light of a red lamp. With her in the narrow hall was a man, who stepped down into the darkness of the garden path.

"Can you see? It is very dark!"

It was Alicia's voice, low and sweet.

A man's laughter answered her, not loudly. And David knew it was Stretton.

"I can't see to the end of my nose. But I can find my way blindfold. Good-night, dear heart!"

Alicia answered him good-night, and the red light glowing dimly on her showed that she kissed her hand to the darkness. Then she shut the door.

Stretton stepped out briskly, dark as it was, and his footsteps made a regular beat in the dusty road. Then suddenly he was swung round by some force that leapt at him from the black night.

He gasped out an oath of terror, startled in his whole being by this sudden and unseen attack.

David had his shoulder in a clutch of iron.

"Stretton Wingfield . . . it's I . . . David Heath. . . . You blackguard! You blackguard!"

Wingfield was not a coward. In wild places he had been attacked before swiftly and suddenly, once by a human beast, once by a beast not human. His brain cleared swiftly, and his jangled nerves steadied with a sort of psychological click.

"Get off!"

He spoke fiercely and swung himself free.

But David had him now by the throat.

"What are you doing with Alicia? Tell me, or I'll choke you. . . ."

Stretton put his fist up, and it struck David's face with the sound of a breaking plank. The blacksmith's son staggered back, an unspoken word rattling in his throat. Then in the darkness he raised his arm swiftly, an arm that since boyhood had swung great hammers, and it struck Stretton senseless in the road.

CHAPTER XIX

It was one of those actions which a man does perhaps once in a lifetime and remembers eternally—surely eternally if the soul is immortal. To David the sight of the dark thing lying stark in the roadway was for more than a moment without meaning. He wondered at it. How did it come there? What had happened? How chilly it was to-night! The wind seemed to have changed suddenly. Then he remembered. With the blow all anger, and passion, and doubt had left him. He was sane again. Thank God he was sane! And there was Stretton Wingfield in the roadway . . . perhaps dead. God! Not dead!

He knelt down, and with steady hands lit a match and held it close to the man's face. A dark little stream trickled down his forehead making a pool in the white dust. David put his ear to Stretton's mouth. God! Not a breath!

David did not feel any sense of guilt or horror at himself. He only hoped with a great anxiety that the man was not dead.

Then a thought flashed into his brain and turned him to stone.

"Alicia loves this man! What would she say if he

were dead? How Alicia would suffer! He must not die! Good God, no! Good God, no!"

With extraordinary strength David lifted Stretton up—a sheer dead-weight—and putting him over one shoulder, staggered down the lane till he came to his father's house and shed. Stumbling across the yard with its litter of scrap-iron he got the door of the shed open with one heavy kick, and then, almost spent, laid down the body on the floor. The long room was in absolute darkness, and for the first time David felt a fear of the silent body at his feet. Fumbling for a match, he cried out in a strangled voice—

"Father! Father!"

In a moment there was a heavy thud overhead, and with a shout of "Coming, lad," the blacksmith crashed down the wooden stairs with an oil lamp in his hand. He held it over his head so as to throw its light across the room, and then he saw a picture that made him falter, while the lamp waved wildly for a moment, as though it would fall. On the floor lay what looked too much like a dead body, and David, white as marble, stood above it, haggardly.

Jonathan put the lamp on the table. "What's this?" he said.

"It's Stretton Wingfield. I believe I've killed him."

Jonathan stared at his son in a wondering way.

"Why did you do it, David?"

"He spent the night with Alicia." David spoke with the same terrible calm that his father showed. Calm that broods over troubled waters.

"Spent the night with her?"

"Yes. She loves him. D'you think he's dead? I hope not."

But Stretton Wingfield was not dead. Presently, as the two men watched him, he moved his head a little and then flung out an arm, groaning. Jonathan went to the sink, and soaking a cloth, came and wiped the blood off Stretton's face.

Stretton opened his eyes and watched the two faces above him wonderingly. They stared at him silently. Only the heavy ticking of the grandfather's clock sounded in the room.

Then after a minute Stretton sat up.

"Where the devil am I?"

He put two hands to his head and groaned. Then, staring at David, he remembered.

"You came near to murder, my friend . . . precious near."

The two men were still silent, watching him.

"Why did you do it, eh?"

"I'm glad I didn't kill you," said David quietly.

Stretton looked at him with heavy eyes. Then a smile flickered on his white lips.

"You're a queer sort of brute! D'you often play that game in the dark?" He got no answer, and there was silence again. Stretton took the damp cloth and pressed it to his forehead.

"Why the devil don't you say something? Can't you take your eyes off me?"

David breathed heavily. The man's cool courage

stirred him to something like admiration, and this caused him to hate him all the more.

"You blackguard. You've got less than you deserved. I give you fair warning . . . if you play the knave with Alicia I'll hurt you more than I've done now."

"Fight in the daylight, you damned coward! It's easy to hit a man down in the dark."

David flushed deeply at the taunt.

"I strike a snake when I see it."

Stretton half rose with a threatening arm, but his head seemed to be crushed by an iron band, and he had to shut his teeth to stop a groan.

"I got you one on the jaw. That's a comfort, anyhow!"

His eyes burned fiercely at David.

"We'll finish this fight another time. If you'll meet me at a safe distance from Long Stretton—we won't scandalise the village, my friend—I'll wipe the floor with you."

David laughed grimly.

"I could choke you with two fingers."

Jonathan broke into this dialogue.

"Stretton Wingfield, if you're strong enough, I ask you to leave this house o' mine. If you aren't strong enough I'll carry you out . . . and I pray God you may never darken the doors again. What you are doing with Miss Alicia—as good a woman as ever stepped—rests between you and her and the Almighty. If you injure that woman's soul, 'twere better a millstone were

round about your neck. I'll finish what my son has begun. . . ."

Stretton got up from the floor, and leant against the wall. He was faint and sick, but he struggled passionately with his weakness.

"You're a nice pair of murderers! . . . As for Alicia, if you bring her name in, it'll be the worse for you."

He stopped to breathe heavily, then, swaying a little, looked at David, less angrily, and with anxious eyes.

"I warn you not to hurt Alicia's reputation. If you blab about what you have seen in the village to-night you will quarrel with her as well as me. D'you understand that?"

In spite of his aching head his thoughts were clear enough to see the danger to himself if a word of the night's work leaked out in Long Stretton, and he must shield the girl.

"Her reputation is safe with me," said David, with a bitter laugh. "It's you that she has to fear."

Stretton looked at him curiously.

"Look here," he said, "I don't bear you any grudge for what's happened. I know you love the girl. I'll play straight with you. . . . If you'll keep your tongue quiet I'll leave the village to-morrow."

"What about Alicia?"

"Ay," said Jonathan. "What about her?"

"We won't discuss that, my friends."

"We will discuss it . . . by the Lord!" said David passionately.

Jonathan checked him again.

"Hush, my lad! Alicia must look after herself. She is not a child now. We are outside this business. Let the man go, and may he show some spark of conscience."

Stretton laughed, moving towards the door.

"Good-night. Remember what I say."

He staggered and held on to the doorpost.

"I'd best come with you," said Jonathan. "You're still weak."

"Thanks. I'll go alone."

The two men listened to his footsteps stumbling across the courtyard.

David Heath leant forward over his knees and buried his face in his hands.

CHAPTER XX

STRETTON WINGFIELD had his faults, but he was not a coward. He came from a fighting stock, and in his adventures had only shown the white feather when strictly necessary to save his skin. Of course, not one of his more remote ancestors would have considered it necessary to save his skin by such a symbol, whatever the situation; but Wingfield, it must be remembered, lived in a common-sense age when life's vital spark is not to be extinguished upon a sentimental issue. It must not therefore be accounted unto him for cowardice that after the episode of last night he was anxious to leave Long Stretton at the earliest moment. He had no physical fear of David Heath, but as he argued to himself in his bedroom, while bathing his head in hot water, it was "devilish awkward" to stay in the same village with a barbarian raging with jealousy and dogging the neighbourhood of Alicia's cottage. He already knew their secret. Stretton did not blink at the fact that David had seen him come out of the cottage in the early dawn and had drawn undeniable conclusions. Possibly he would not keep the secret to himself. To keep any secret in a village requires infinite tact, and young Heath seemed to him the most tactless person Stretton had had the misfortune to meet. For Alicia's

sake as well as for his own he must change his camp. It was seriously of importance that the little aunts should be kept in ignorance of what had passed. He could not do without their contributions to an income already too small for his needs.

Being a man of quick decision, Stretton acted at once. At breakfast he had three letters and a telegram. The last was from his friend Edward Moorhouse, who wired: "*What the blazes are you doing? Can't move without you.*" It was a good excuse.

Stretton folded it face downwards on the table and looked across to Miss Cecily, who was pouring out the coffee. It was then eleven o'clock, and both the ladies had had breakfast three hours before, but they liked to sit with Stretton while he had his leisurely meal.

"I'm sorry, Aunt, I must go to town at once. There's a twelve train, isn't there?"

Miss Cecily put down a cup hurriedly.

"Stretton! and I have arranged a garden party this very afternoon in your honour!"

"Oh, you really cannot go," said Miss Cecily. "Our guests would think us *mad!*"

"A thousand apologies, dear ladies," said Stretton firmly. "If the whole county were coming this afternoon they would have to do without my insignificant self. My whole career depends upon an interview this afternoon. I have been wired for by my political chief. It is most important."

"Teddy" Moorhouse, as he was invariably called at the "Travellers'," would have howled with laughter at

his title of "political chief." At Eton he had fagged humbly to Stretton Wingfield, and at Oxford Wingfield had graciously favoured him with an intellectual companionship. As a hopeless duffer in anything but sport, Teddy had a profound reverence for Wingfield's superior wisdom. This, however, was unknown to the aunts, and when Stretton mentioned the name of Lord Edward Moorhouse they were duly impressed—and depressed.

"I suppose you cannot possibly wire 'Unavoidably detained' or 'Family reasons prevent?'" said Miss Agnes.

"Impossible! dear Aunt."

Miss Cecily cried a little.

"After all our letters about you! We shall look so *very* foolish."

Stretton, however, was resolute, and the aunts resigned themselves to a disappointment which in their quiet lives was naturally more bitter than seemed at all justified to Stretton.

It was half-past eleven when he had finished breakfast, and he had but half-an-hour in which to get his bag packed—Blinkworthy gasped at the idea of performing the task in less than an hour—to write a letter to Alicia, and to rattle the trap down to the station. That gave him ten minutes all told in the house. Blinkworthy begged to say that to pack a portmanteau respectably in ten minutes was not possible, even to an archangel. Stretton—in the smoking-room, where he seized pen and notepaper—told him not to be a silly

old idiot, but to get the job done—sharp. Shutting the door on the grumbling old gentleman, he sat down to write a letter that was not easy even to a man who had two novels to his name. But there was no time for style, and in five minutes he sealed the envelope with a sigh that was half regret for the literary opportunity that had been wasted through want of time and half satisfaction at a delicate task not quite unsuccessfully achieved.

“MY DEAR LADY OF THE MIST,

“(I shall always think of you as rising out of the dew-pond on the Great Downs as Love out of the sea-foam, a vision to me of infinite beauty, cleansing to a heart too familiar with the ugly things of life.)

“I write my first letter to you, as I am leaving Long Stretton by the twelve o’clock train—in twenty minutes’ time from now. I have been called suddenly to town. I go because to-night I will take the first step in the career of my future life. As you will share that life, it is for you that I go, though my grief is infinite that I cannot hold your dear body in my arms and tell you that your spirit is my guidance, now and always. You know this, do you not? I need not ask you to have faith in me. It is your faith which gives me good confidence in what, for you and for me, will, I believe, be a future full of joy.

“STRETTON WINGFIELD.

“P.S.—You will remember what I said about the aunts. You must keep our secret.”

It was a little ragged, and the grammar would hardly bear analysis, but to write a letter such as this in five minutes is not a thing that many men could do, even so well. At least Stretton thought so, and it cheered him a little. While the words slipped from his pen he had realised—what he had not done before in the intellectual activity of the early morning—that he would not see Alicia for—for how long? He pondered over the question. For how long? He could not find an answer, and a sudden sense of guiltiness and shame surged through him. He took up the letter and made a motion to tear it up. Yes, by God, he would not go! He would play the game straight. The world was well lost for Alicia.

But Fate intervened in the person of Blinkworthy. "Your bag is packed, sir."

There was a gleam of triumph in the old man's eye. He had accomplished the impossible!

Stretton saw the hand of Fate.

"Good man!" he cried.

In three minutes he said good-bye to his aunts.

Miss Agnes embraced him with all the fortitude of a Roman matron saying farewell to her warrior son, but Miss Cecily clung to his hand, crying with red eyes. The elder lady slipped an envelope into his hand. In the train afterwards he found that it covered a check for a hundred pounds, and he blessed her as a good soul.

"Come again soon, dear Stretton. Your visit has put new life into us," said Miss Agnes.

"We shall be m-m-miserable without you," said poor little Aunt Cecily.

He embraced them both, feeling very tender towards them. They were dear ladies. Then distributing largesse to the servants, with the artificial secrecy requisite for this ceremony, he sprang into the trap, and shaking the ribbons, frisked up the cob and was away. The groom, who was also under-gardener, a man of fifty, and a mere youth compared to the other servants, clung on to his seat, and prayed fervently to the Lord that he might reach the station alive.

At the market-place Stretton pulled the cob on to its haunches, and leant down to hand his letter to a small boy, who narrowly escaped sudden death, and not knowing the peril stared at the cart with open mouth.

"Look here, Tommy, take that to Miss Frensham, and here's sixpence for you. Understand?"

"Yes," said the boy.

"Who have you got to give it to?"

"School marm."

"Right, and don't you forget."

The trap swayed again, and Robert the groom was nearly pitched out. But by the blessing of God, or sheer luck, they reached the corner and steered a straight course for the station. Once more Stretton pulled up the panting cob.

It stopped by the side of David Heath, who was walking with a steady pace along the dusty road.

"Morning!" said Stretton cheerfully.

David looked up at him and did not answer. His mouth hardened a little, and he stepped back on to the path.

"I am just off to town. You'll forget what happened last night? You won't tell any one?"

He spoke lightly in order not to rouse the suspicion of the groom, but his eyes were anxious.

"I shall not forget," said David slowly. Then with a grim, contemptuous laugh, "But I won't tell. Don't be afraid."

"Good man! I thought you wouldn't."

He used the whip, and in a moment had left David on the roadside. For a mile he gave the horse no mercy, but slackened within sight of the station, and caught the train with a minute to spare.

CHAPTER XXI

WHEN Alicia opened the letter from Stretton—her instinct told her it was from him when she saw the florid, picturesque writing on the envelope—it was not with the ordinary emotion of a girl who receives her first love letter. She became white, and trembled, possessed by fears. The small boy had told her that it was from the gentleman down at the Hall who was a-driving like mad to the station.

So . . . he was leaving Long Stretton . . . suddenly . . . though yesterday—or rather this very morning, after midnight, he said that he would stay another week!

What did it mean?

She read the letter slowly, and then laid it down on the round table, staring with serious eyes through the open window to the brown hills beyond. So he was gone . . . and she had the memory of those four days and nights which had changed her life much more than the four years preceding them!

But she had more than the memory, she had faith and hope—faith in Stretton's love, and hope in a future meeting with him, when there would be no such sad parting as this.

Faith in his love. She clung to that. She would

not have acted as she had done without absolute faith. And yet faith may be built upon doubts, and upon the knowledge that it exists because of doubt. For faith is not the belief in facts we can see plainly before our eyes. It is the passionate assertion of the soul in a truth beyond the proof and test of facts that can be seen and touched and demonstrated.

Alicia had yielded to Stretton's love because her soul demanded such yielding. Yet she knew him to be weak, to be easily led by the passing mood or passion, to be insincere to himself, more often unconsciously than consciously. She knew that he was a dangerous man for any woman who gave her heart into his keeping. She had listened quietly while he talked, sometimes excitedly, sometimes boastfully, and always egotistically, and she had weighed him in her mind, and found him wanting in that sureness of principle and fixity of purpose which were her own characteristics. If she had had a sister, and often she imagined how blessed that would be to her, she would have been terrified at the thought of such a man as Stretton coming into the girl's life. She would have warned her, on bended knees if necessary, to beware of him. Her heart fluttered, and sank down at the thought that Stretton had only perhaps played with her, and now was leaving her, perhaps for ever. But her soul was stronger than the weakness of her heart. She was sure—she was sure of his love. She had faith in the power of love, which—however base or weak may be the man or woman—is a natural, a spiritual attraction,

stronger and more binding than principles, or honour, or laws, or ceremonies. That was her creed, for which she would suffer even death gladly.

Oh, but it was sad! He had left her—for how long?—and she was alone. He would send for her, but she must wait in loneliness after his blessed companionship.

He was weak . . . she could not hide *that*, but he was kind. He was an egoist, but gay, and exquisitely genial. He was tempted to boast, but he had little tendernesses and a charm of manner that warmed one's heart in his presence. He had been passionate, his love had been a flame at times, but it was an ethereal fire that had not left her scorched, filling her rather with infinite sweetness.

She had nothing now but the dream of a dream . . . and the great hope. She would wait patiently. That was part of her creed—to wait . . . if need be for a lifetime . . . until the meeting on the other side of death.

She would give him the uttermost loyalty however long he kept her waiting, and when one day he said "*Come*," she would go to him on the instant with a heart in which his image had lain as in a shrine. . . .

There was a secret between them. No one in the world knew of their love; she was glad of that, though, as a rule, she hated secrecy. But love was in itself so sacred and secret that publicity seemed to her like sacrilege. She had often wondered, and sometimes blushed, at young girls talking and gossiping about their lovers. It seemed like exhibiting their naked souls in

the market-place. She was glad that there was some necessity for secrecy. She would have hated congratulations from village people, to have been obliged to answer them with silly smiles, knowing how shy and sad a thing love is. Now she could be alone with her little lamp, worshipping at the flame in solitude. . . .

How lonely it was! . . . How empty the chair looked where Stretton had sat such a few hours ago! And though she must wait for him patiently, how far away to-morrow morning seemed when to-night Stretton would not come to take her in his arms and kiss her lips . . . How long! . . .

She turned from the window, suddenly roused by a conflict of emotions tearing wildly at her heart, though she had seemed to think so calmly. She fell on to her knees, and with her head upon the little sofa, and her arms clasping its cushions, wept silently, convulsively, until she was exhausted with her tears.

CHAPTER XXII

THAT evening David called upon Alicia. He looked pale and older since she had last seen him, though it was but a short time. The lines had deepened under his eyes, and his mouth seemed harder and more resolute, though, indeed it had never been weak. Alicia saw at once an indefinable difference in him, and for a few moments while they talked quietly she wondered with vague uneasiness as to the cause of this change.

Then he explained it simply, without embarrassment, and she was reassured.

"I've been ill. It was very stupid, a sort of nervous breakdown after hard work, I suppose. A blacksmith's son with nerves!"

He laughed, though his eyes were serious as he watched her.

"Dear friend!" said Alicia very tenderly. "Of course you must be run down after your big grind at Oxford. You must rest, and get all your strength back before starting your new life in London."

After the excitement of her love for Stretton it was infinitely soothing to have this quiet friendship with David. Her secret, which was a fire within her, seemed to give a new warmth and tenderness to this old companionship. She felt more of a mother's love

for David because her heart had been kindled by a spiritual passion for the other man. She was so glad that it would make no difference between David and herself. Foolishly, she had been afraid. . . .

"I hope to get a rest before taking up my new work, but it won't be in Long Stretton."

"No!"

Alicia gave a little gasp of surprise.

"Canon Bentley has asked me to stay with him in town for a few weeks so that I may be inspired with his ideals and follow in his footsteps at Erasmus Hall! He doesn't put it like that, but that's what he means."

"Oh . . . then you are leaving the village, too?" said Alicia, with a sudden despondency. She had so hoped that with David her parting from Stretton would be solaced by this good friendship.

David noticed that she had said, "You are leaving the village, *too?*" The word stabbed him, and he flushed to the temples. But he had worked out a new philosophy, in great travail of spirit, after the mad, tempestuous passion of which he was now sick and ashamed. He had laid down for himself the law of self-sacrifice. Having abandoned his hopes, he would at least suck the bitter sweetness of resignation. And if he could not have the blessedness of Alicia's love he would not deny himself her friendship. He would be loyal to *that* though his heart bled to death. He believed that in the future Alicia would need his friendship, would need at least some honest man to advise

her in despair. An infinite pity, a ghastly fear for her stifled his selfishness and purified him.

"I'm sorry that I can't stay at home for some months," he said. "I have looked forward so eagerly to long walks and talks with you. But I can hardly refuse the Canon's wish. It is almost a command, and I have accepted service under him."

"Oh . . . of course, of course," said Alicia quickly. "You must think only of your work, of your future. But I am disappointed in a selfish way. . . . I shall be very lonely . . . and just now I want the comfort of your dear friendship."

David was frightfully moved by her words. This tenderness, this leaning upon him was almost unbearable in its sweetness.

"In London, or wherever in the world," he said huskily, "I am your friend always. If ever you are in any kind of trouble, if I can help you by any services, you know that I would walk barefoot on thorns to come to you."

Alicia reached for his hand, and her tears fell upon it.

"I am blest to have such friendship," she said. "It is a precious gift."

Then suddenly, the meaning that lay behind his words dawned upon her. Still holding his hand she looked up at him wonderingly, and white to the lips.

"You know?" she whispered. "You know what has happened?"

David went to the window, white also.

"Yes," he said quietly, "I know."

There was silence between them, and David gazed out of the window, seeing nothing.

"How did you know, David?" said Alicia presently. "I thought . . . I hoped . . . we had kept our secret."

"I saw you in the wood together," said David in a strangled voice, still staring into the garden, ". . . and afterwards I saw him leave your house . . . in the dawn."

Alicia bent her head, while a deep flush crept into her cheeks. She thought silently and swiftly. It seemed to David that the world was swimming round him, and it made him feel sick.

"Does any one else know?"

"My father . . . we will not tell."

Alicia rose and touched him on the arm, and he started as though awakened from a sleep.

"You understand? . . . You do not blame me?"

David gripped the back of a chair, and his eyes met those of Alicia, which were dim with tears. He breathed heavily and almost noisily, and a blue vein throbbed in his forehead.

"I do not blame you. . . . Good God! who am I . . . to blame you? . . . You are a saint. Your purity would shame the devil. . . . But you are too innocent. You do not understand what you are doing. Don't you see . . . *don't you see* that Stretton Wingfield will destroy you, and will drag you down to the dirt? He is ruthless . . . oh, he is a ruthless hound! I know that type of man, charming and weak and hellish in their selfishness. Alicia . . . Alicia! For God's sake . . .

think what you are doing . . . draw back before it is too late!"

He had begun quietly, determined to keep himself in check, but his fierce emotion broke down his self-restraint and surged into his brain so that at the end his words were loud and passionate in their appeal.

Alicia turned to the fireplace and put her hands on the mantel-board, with her forehead against them. "I cannot draw back. It is already too late."

David stared at her, an expression of horror gradually blanching his face.

"Already . . . too late!" he whispered hoarsely; ". . . oh, my God!"

He gave an awful groan, and sinking into the chair behind him let his head fall upon his chest, a haggard and broken man.

Alicia crossed from the fireplace and put her hand on his shoulder.

"David," she said gently, "do not be frightened on my account. Stretton is not such a man as you imagine. His love for me is perfectly sincere and pure. I have faith in him."

David groaned again.

"Do you not trust me?" said Alicia, with a note of anger in her voice. "Do you not believe me when I say that this love is the proudest, most joyful thing in my life? Oh, you are like the others! You imagine ugly and horrid things. You do not understand the meaning of love! You judge and condemn because you have no charity, nor faith in human nature."

David lifted his head. Her angry words sobered him, and he remembered his secret vows and resolutions. Had he not said to himself that he would be the true friend of this woman?

"Alicia," he said in a broken voice, "do not be angry. I should not have spoken like that . . . I was a brute! . . . I do not judge or condemn. And I understand your perfect goodness. I pray to God that man will be worthy of you!"

Alicia burst into tears and wept hysterically, so that David was frightened.

"Alicia! . . . Alicia! . . . Alicia!"

He repeated her name pleadingly, soothingly, tenderly.

Presently she grew calmer, and brushed her tears away, trying to laugh.

"I am very foolish. . . . But I could not bear to hear what you thought of Stretton."

"Don't let us talk about it any more," said David quietly. "Only remember that nothing may ever break our friendship."

"I know that, David. You are the best of friends."

They talked of other things, of the garden, and the gossip of the village. David told one or two stories of Oxford, and Alicia laughed. In half an hour no one looking in upon them would have guessed the passionate little drama that had been played in the room.

"And when do you go to town?" said Alicia presently.

"To-morrow morning, early."

"So soon?"

She became very grave, and her lips trembled, but she mastered herself and spoke hopefully, enthusiastically of his future.

"You will write to me—often?"

"How often?" said David, smiling.

"Once a week, without fail, David?"

"I promise."

When he said good-bye to her they looked into each other's eyes and read many things which neither said.

At the door she put her hands on his shoulders, and as he bent his head she kissed him twice on the forehead.

"Good-bye, my friend," she said.

CHAPTER XXIII

ALICIA was more lonely than ever in her life before when David and Stretton had both left the village. Her loneliness was partly of her own making. In spite of repeated invitations she avoided going up to the Hall, as much as she could without actual discourtesy to the two ladies. On the Wednesday evenings which they set apart for their At Home nights she pleaded a headache, or home-lessons to correct, or letters to write. The truth was that she felt a hypocrite and a false friend in the presence of the Wingfield ladies. For many weeks after Stretton's departure he was the constant subject of their conversation. They asked Alicia her opinion of him. They lamented that he was such a bad correspondent, only dashing off a few lines at rare intervals. They wondered often what the work was upon which, as he said, he was so frightfully busy. Such conversations as these were painfully disconcerting to Alicia. She felt that the simplicity of her nature was being warped by the secret of her relations with Stretton, of which these two dear ladies were utterly innocent. Though she parried their questions and sat silent while they talked of Stretton, she was tortured by the thought that she was living a lie. She would have liked to take each one apart and

make confession. Sometimes when Miss Cecily spoke to her alone and intimately, in the little bedroom upstairs, it was almost painful to check the words which would have dispelled this horrid secrecy. During the first two months of his absence she heard from Stretton frequently, though not with the weekly regularity of David. Long letters full of details about his movements day by day, his plans, his ambitions, his most intimate thoughts. So when Miss Agnes or Miss Cecily craved to hear from him, and sighed that he kept them so much in ignorance, it was hard for Alicia to keep silent, to say nothing of what she knew. For the first time in her life she accused herself of deceitfulness, and was humiliated in her own eyes. She was tempted often to write to Stretton begging to be released from her pledge of secrecy, but she knew that he considered it most necessary for his own sake—twice in his letters he laid stress on the importance of it—and she knew in sober thought that any revelation to the two ladies would be unwise at this time. Miss Cecily, no doubt, would be led to sympathise, in her pretty sentimental way, but Miss Agnes, who was as firm as a rock when what she called her principles were involved, would certainly not continue her favours to Stretton. The fact that Stretton's relation's with Alicia had been kept secret from the beginning, and had been established without any of "the proprieties," would be a scandal and an outrage to this sensitive and decorous soul. No! for Stretton's sake Alicia must keep silent.

Her loneliness was increased because the Vicar

avoided her strenuously, and she on her side could not forget or forgive the scene in which he had discovered his curious passion. When they met now he lifted his hat, but kept his eyes on the ground. Occasionally they encountered each other in the cottages, but then only a few conventional phrases passed between them.

And Jonathan was no longer the good friend he had been. She went sometimes to his forge, but she realised that the bonds of affection between them had been snapped, and not by her, but by him. He was silent and abstracted when she came, sometimes even sullen. He seemed to eye her with distrust and disapproval, and knowing that he knew her secret and resented it, she was embarrassed and self-conscious with him. So gradually she went less often, though it pained her excessively that this friendship should have grown cold.

She lived more and more with her own thoughts, and her face began to show the influence of this introspective life. Her eyes became more luminous and dark, and an air of mysticism about her, which had always been characteristic of her in serious moods, was now more settled in its Rossetti-like expression. She was kept alive, as it were, by her letters from Stretton, and from David, too. The postman's knock now beat upon her heart, for though David's letter came regularly every Wednesday morning, Stretton's came at all times, flying notes of a few lines, then a pause of a few days, sometimes of more than a week, until, when

she began to pine, a long budget would come of many closely-written pages.

She read them with a fluttering heart.

They were passionate at first, written late at night, when imagination is excited by the silence that follows a noisy day, and when words flow on to the paper without premeditation or restraint. She could see how the pen had moved swiftly, covering the sheets with a running style. His expressions were vivid and heated. His choice of words was unconventional though not strained. He used metaphors a little far-fetched, yet perfectly expressive. He dashed off quick sketches and lightning impressions.

At times he was very merry and wrote nonsense letters filled with paradox and epigrams and fantastic caricatures. But at the beginning he was ardent and sensuous, and put such a warmth of love into his words that Alicia read them with a flushed face, while her pulse throbbed nervously; and when she went to bed with his letter under her pillow the words burned through their covering into her brain, so that she tossed feverishly through the night.

From the turmoil and tumult of his days she unravelled the thread of his plot. He was playing for the leadership of the new party of Independent Democrats or Individualists, as they began to be called, a name ridiculed and scoffed at in both the Ministerial and Opposition papers, but recognised, in spite of caricatures, as a possible "Third Party" in the House. He sketched out the political situation for her. There

had been a reaction in the tide for Socialism. The campaign against the House of Lords and the attack upon landowners had turned over public favour to the Constitutionalists. There was every prospect that the women would give their votes to the Government, and in that case the Constitutionalists would come back with a more respectable majority than they now held. The Ministers were prophesying a sweeping victory, but it was certain that they were afraid of the Independent Democrats, who, as a middle party, might capture many seats. They were putting up candidates in most of the boroughs, and Stretton's energy and oratory already marked him out as a possible leader of the new party. His name, and his father's fame, which still lingered as a tradition, counted for much. It was certain also that as the nephew of the Minister for War, his independent stand against the Government had a piquancy which was at least an excellent advertisement.

In the Press they called him, among other nicknames, "Individual Wingfield," and in *The World* there was an anonymous prose satire of him, written, he told Alicia, by one of his most intimate friends—Ralph Sutton, the novelist—which pilloried him ruthlessly as "the popinjay of politics." The whole campaign of the Individualists was regarded as a huge joke by the majority, though some of the leader writers prophesied that it might have serious consequences. It certainly lent itself to satire. Quite a number of the candidates were sprigs of aristocracy; among them Lord John Hutton, Lord Percival Percy, the Hon. Charles

Munster, Sir Philip Wainwright, Sir Horace Brympton, Sir Bulwer Ashton, and Sir Courtenay Clandon. They also numbered such men as Hilary Osgood, the painter, Adam Inchbold, the novelist, Frank Swiveller, the dramatist, Paul Ainsworth, the poet, and Cuthbert Waynfleet, the author of *Individualism* and *Ethics in Evolution*.

The Times, which was becoming almost merry in its leading articles, published a list of the Individualists with the dates of their birth, deducing therefrom that three had just attained their majority, five were under thirty years of age, four were under thirty-five, and only one had passed his fortieth year.

"We suggest," said *The Times*, "that these political babes and sucklings should be sent back to the nursery of life. They should be seen but not heard. At present, like spoilt children, they are making far too much noise in our household, and their elders can scarcely make themselves heard. We trust that at the general election John Bull, as a discreet parent, will give them all a good whipping and send them to bed."

The *Daily Mail*, who turned on their funny man and their oracle alternately in order to make the most of the situation, drew an ingenious parallel between the Independent Democrats and the leaders of the French Revolution of '89. They dubbed Stretton Wingfield as Lafayette, and Lord John Hutton as "the sea-green incorruptible," and Lord Percival Percy as the Marquis de Narbonne. In the imagination of this ingenious young gentleman, whoever he might be,

Cuthbert Waynefleet was a reincarnation of Marat with a touch of Chadband, Hilary Osgood was "Dainty Desmoulins," and Sir Courtenay Clandon "a dummy Danton."

"Already," said the *Daily Mail*, "the English aristocracy is beginning to tremble before the ominous signs of the forthcoming election, and a tide of emigration has set in. Referring to our Society and Personal column, it will be seen that Paris is already full of English visitors. How soon, we wonder, will the guillotine be set up in Trafalgar Square and a Committee of Public Safety sit in the House of Lords?"

Stretton sent these cuttings to Alicia, who read them with indignation. To her the Individualist campaign was intensely serious, and these caricatures in the Press seemed to her slanderous and abominable.

In Stretton's letters she found frequent portrait sketches of the leaders of the campaign, many of whom were his old college friends, and Alicia soon seemed to be familiar with their characteristics.

"Our strong man," wrote Stretton, "is Cuthbert Waynefleet. He is our philosopher and high priest. I suppose you have read his *Individualism*. That is the gospel of our revolution, and the Magna Charta of English liberty. The man himself is complex. I have not yet sounded the depths of him. He is a libertine, of course, and is not tolerated in society, yet his chivalry to women is old-fashioned, and his manners with them exquisite. With men he is cross-grained, and often violent. My knuckles ache at times to break his head.

But in his quiet moods, when not engaged in argument (which is not often), he is gentle and good-tempered. He speaks best—and then like a very Demosthenes—when nearly drunk. He haunts the taverns off Fleet Street, and soaks port wine while he writes those amazing tracts which will, I believe, change the political constitution of this country. They call him ‘Marat,’ and there is something in the idea, though the real Marat had not the human qualities of Waynefleet. There is more of Mirabeau about him.”

Another portrait that stood out in Stretton’s letters, and which he filled in afterwards with many little touches, was that of Hilary Osgood, the painter, who, according to the *Daily Mail*, was “Dainty Desmoulins.”

“You must know Hilary one of these days,” wrote Stretton. “He is a delightful creature, a child younger than Cupid, but with the wisdom of the serpent. He dresses like an eighteenth-century dandy, and looks a very pretty kind of ass. One could almost kiss him for his blue eyes and fair skin, but for all that he has a diabolical audacity, and the things he says without a blush, with the most winsome smile imaginable, must make the Government squirm. The ladies flock to his platforms, and they will vote solid for him. He promises to give a kiss for every vote, which I believe is bribery and corruption, according to the new election laws. He is a dangerous young devil, but the best of fun.”

“Between ourselves,” wrote Stretton in another letter, “we have some choice fools among us. Hutton

and Percy are almost enough to ruin any cause. They are constantly in a state of funk, as they well might be, being the younger sons of dukes, and I have to bully them by word of mouth, by letters, by telegrams and messages, to keep them to their pledges. And yet they believe we could not do without them, and take themselves quite seriously! Lord John looks like a groom on a holiday, and, indeed, what he doesn't know about horseflesh is not knowledge. He is scared to death of women, and in a campaign in which women's votes count for so much he is almost useless.

"Percy, on the other hand, is a portentous idiot, who would have made an excellent curate. He speaks with a frightful lisp, and casts sheep's eyes at everything in a skirt. He lives in terror of his mother, 'the dear Duchess,' who is a most formidable lady, and would, I am sure, spank him across her knee if she could get hold of him. But he hasn't been near Winchilsea House since his name appeared on our first manifesto."

CHAPTER XXIV

STRETTON had certainly thrown off his old dilettantism and easy-going life. He seemed to be possessed of wings, and was in a different part of the country addressing great audiences every twenty-four hours. He wrote from Bristol and Birmingham, Sheffield, Leeds, Manchester, Bolton, Oldham, Exeter, Plymouth, Lincoln, Norwich, and a score of other towns. At first he was only reported at length in local papers, of which he sent scraps of cuttings to Alicia, who read his speeches with as much excitement as if she had experienced the electricity of the audience. She could see his gestures, and hear his voice in every phrase. His glowing oratory, flamboyant, sarcastic, vivid, and picturesque, astonished her with its enthusiasm and variety. She detected sometimes a certain insincerity of sentiment, a dangerous facility for playing upon the popular passions, and a light-hearted disregard of strict accuracy of fact, which filled her with a vague sense of uneasiness. In one of her letters she warned him against these tendencies, and begged him to sacrifice effect for sincerity. "I know very little of these things," she wrote with humility, "but, my dear, I feel very strongly that truth is always the best of arguments. The influence of a clever phrase may be great

at the moment, but if it lacks sincerity it is a double-edged weapon."

She reproached herself afterwards for having written in this strain, knowing that in the excitement of a public meeting the imagination of a speaker is not to be fettered by caution. But Stretton answered her letter in his frank way of consent.

"You are quite right, dear heart. My tongue wags fast and foolishly, and I am filled with self-abasement when in the cold morning I read what I spoke at night. But the leopard cannot change his spots, and if I played for safety I should be dumb."

As the months passed and the great fight came near, Stretton's letters became less frequent, and then were brief and hurried notes. Alicia read them with a growing fear, which she tried vainly to thrust back from her soul. Brief as they were, she detected a change of tone in them. They no longer contained those burning words which still glowed in his earlier letters locked in her box. He no longer spoke of a future which they would share together. He was living only in the present. He wrote excitedly, but it was always of the political situation. A postcard with a despondent line reached her—"We shall be badly beaten." A week later he wrote, "I believe we shall win." Then, "My last speech did me a lot of harm," and later, "Waynefleet is stealing all my thunder; I am only his satellite."

Alicia pined for that communion of thought which he had given in his earlier letters, when he had sat

down late at night remembering his love. Was he forgetting? Had he already forgotten?

It was natural that he should be entirely absorbed in his political work. She must not complain or fret. Yet, oh, surely he might forget the world for at least a few minutes, and remember the woman who was waiting in loneliness!

There came a time when he did not write at all. Four weeks passed and not a word! She wondered if he were ill, if he had broken down under the strain. But no; in the papers she followed him across the country, where he was always speaking. The London papers now reported him at length. "The Individualist" was a prominent heading. They were no longer laughed at. They were beginning to be feared.

Why did not Stretton write? She sent him long letters, not complaining, but wistful and pleading for news of him. He did not answer.

Alicia was growing thin and careworn. She lay awake at night and got up languidly with weary eyes next morning. It was a struggle to do her duty in the school. The children worried her, and she lost her sweet tranquillity with them. The Wingfield ladies and other friends in the village asked her what was the matter. They thought she was sickening for an illness.

Miss Cecily, always solicitous for her health, brought her bowls of soup and jelly, and begged her to take every care of herself.

She began to get frightened at her own languor and

weakness, and then one day she wrote to Stretton confiding to him a secret which would have been joy to her but for his long silence.

"My dear Stretton," she wrote. "I am going to have a child. It will be your child as well as mine. Will you not write to me?"

CHAPTER XXV

ALICIA wrote three letters to Stretton after that note in which she told him her news, and there was a week between each of them.

In the first she wrote:—

“MY DEAR LOVE,

“Oh, I may call you that though you do not answer now with any love! A week has passed since I told you what would surely bring *some* response, and move you with a remembrance of the woman to whom you made so many promises. You have forgotten me—and I have just been reading, though I could hardly see for tears, your earlier letters, so tender, so full of comradeship, so passionate in protestation (oh, verily you protested too much!)—and even now, after these long weeks of silence, I can hardly believe that you have quite forgotten. I make allowances for the excitement of your great campaign. I do not demand, like some women, that my lover should give up the world for love. I have told you many times that I am content to wait—with patience longer than my life—but when I said so it was with the thought that though we might be parted by distance, always we should be close in spirit. My spirit goes out to meet

you, but you are not there. I wander in the darkness and you do not come to me. I wait for you, but my loneliness becomes despair. Oh—and I believed in you! I believed in you, Stretton! The doubts and fears that rose in my woman's heart I stifled down as unworthy of your love. I gave myself to you in joy, in purity, in absolute trust. If I do not hear from you, how can I keep that trust? I hate to tell you, but the truth is best. My faith in your honour is ebbing away, and in its place comes pitiful contempt. Stretton, for the sake of our love, for the sake of the child coming from eternity into time, answer me. Send one word to your unhappy

“ALICIA.”

In her second letter Alicia reproached herself for the one before.

“I was weak and feverish. I take back all I wrote in bitterness. I will be patient, still, dear Stretton, believing that when this political uproar has calmed down you will write to me again. I have been thinking of those four days when you sat and walked with me, and a hundred little things you said come back to reassure me. I see your grey eyes, so candid, sincere—they are not lying eyes. I cannot believe that a man could speak and write as you did, Stretton, and in a few months deny himself by absolute forgetfulness. Your words were so passionate, my love, that I felt ashamed, knowing my colder nature. It is I now that am tempted to passion. Oh, if I did not check this

pen I should pour my heart out on the paper. If I did not resist the foolishness I should put into words some of the fever that burns me now. But I think of the little child, and I try to be calm, be hopeful even for the sake of the little life that must not be clouded before its birth with a mother's despair and fretfulness. . . . In a little while, dear Stretton, I shall not be able to keep this secret. I confess I dread that time when inevitably people must guess. What shall I do then? I should not be ashamed if I had words of comfort from you; if I had not to hide a secret as a guilty thing. I would rejoice before the world in the promise of motherhood if I could name the father of the child, or at least boast of his love. Will you deny me that, Stretton, my dear? Surely not! Surely not!"

The days passed, and Alicia waited still for the letter that did not come. Every morning she rose with a new eagerness in spite of the languor of her body, believing that to-day the silence would be broken. But the morning post would pass without a letter, and she would brace herself anew to wait expectantly again for the second post in the evening. Yes, before the night came she would hear from him, and her pillow would be wet with tears of joy instead of tears of anguish. Alas! And the night would pass without the words that would have given her courage. The strain wore her down in body and spirit. She grew so listless that after the school hours she could do nothing but pace up and down her little room, and at night

she could not lie still, but tossed feverishly with moans and inarticulate cries that passed her parched lips, though she tried to stifle them. It was after one such night that she sat down before breakfast, limply and with dark, burning eyes, to write a last letter to Stretton. Her self-control was gone. She could put no check on her pen, and she was blind to the words she wrote, incoherently and wildly.

"God knows I have waited long enough. I will not write to you again. My faith is not only destroyed in you, it is destroyed in all that I believe to be true. What I thought was love was lust. What I thought was purity was vile and obscene. I will burn your letters, which I have kissed a thousand times and blotted with my tears, as I would burn foul rags reeking with disease. I would burn my hands that you once held to your lips, because they are impure. But for the child I would burn myself, because you have made me vile. What sort of man you were, I do not know. You must be something devilish that you hide so false a heart behind such outward candour and apparent honesty. Why did I not see the devil grinning in those grey eyes that stared into my soul? If there were a God He would have warned me. You have thrust me aside as a woman you once played with and would now be bothered with no more. So also I will forget you, or if I must remember, it shall be to teach my child what a dastard was its father. For that alone I thank you. I shall have a little one. My motherhood will not be denied all its joy. I will be

happy in that. I will be kinder than God, and will not visit the sins of the father on the child. I think I hate you . . . and yet I do not! . . . Even now, if you came to me, I should fall at your feet. Even, I think, in twenty years, if you call to me across the silence I shall speed to you. But I shall not write again. Oh, Stretton, my love, my heart is broken. Oh, God! Oh, my love! Oh, my poor unborn child! Good-bye, my Stretton, I shall not write again."

She became calmer after this, and the sorrow of resignation was easier to bear than feverish expectancy and doubtful hope. She had, even, some strange satisfaction in the burning of Stretton's letters, the exquisite pleasure of self-torture which is the most subtle and exciting form of sensual enjoyment. She lingered over them, not casting them in a heap to the flames, but burning them one by one, watching each one curl and blacken with eyes that reflected the fire within her soul, the fire in which, spiritually, Stretton's passionate words were burnt to ashes.

In the days that followed she turned to David Heath for comfort and restfulness, as she had found peace in his strong friendship after the first passionate joys of love. His letters now took the place of Stretton's, and she read them many times, finding in their calm, well-balanced, unemotional expression an antidote to the fever of her mind.

He wrote fully of his new experiences, but without vanity, and knowing that she would be most interested in his new life.

He was not altogether satisfied with it.

"I find," he said, "hypocrisy, selfishness, and cant masquerading as philanthropy and reform. This settlement is run by young University men who come to the East End in a spirit of self-conscious martyrdom and self-righteousness. They believe themselves to be mighty fine democrats, but they have no real understanding of the people and treat them *de haut en bas*. So it follows that the working-men attracted to our lectures and social gatherings are those who have not the spirit to resent being patronised, or who are eager to get something for nothing, or wish to climb up in the social scale so that they can kick those on the rung beneath. Our debates are examples of vanity, crass ignorance, and low vulgarity. The absurd airs of our 'Varsity young men are only less objectionable than the violent conceit and 'uppishness' of the working-men. I am not popular. Last night I went for the lecturers and pounded them for their insincerity. I told them that they reminded me of the worst type of missionary who goes blundering among native races with a fine notion of his Heaven-sent vocation and, without the slightest knowledge of native morality and law, outrages the strongest and noblest traditions of their race. The only converts he makes are those he buys and bribes. They do not like *that*, I can tell you! They made a formal complaint to the Warden, who, to their amazement, agreed cordially with every word I said, and told them to take the truth to heart. He is the only man among them, and in spite of his sub-

lime self-confidence and vanity, which clothes him in impregnable armour, he is sincere, earnest in his devotion to the intellectual and social progress of the people, and amazing in his energy. He believes in me, I think, and will not listen to slanderers and scoffers who would undermine my position. I have started a series of lectures on 'The Spirit of Democracy,' and I am glad to say that they are attracting a more honest class of working-men than generally find their way to Erasmus Hall."

Not once in all his letters did David Heath let slip even one word that betrayed emotion or sentiment. Not once did he write the name of Stretton Wingfield, or mention the Individualist campaign, which must have been in his thoughts, as in every one's thoughts, during those days of political strife.

Alicia thanked him in her heart for this. David was a source of infinite comfort to her, because of his strength, his reticence, his calm common sense.

She did not see the white face of the "Master of Erasmus," as he was called now, nor how he stifled back his passion when he wrote those letters of quiet gossip.

CHAPTER XXVI

ONE morning, a week after she had written her last letter to Stretton, Alicia sent her little servant round the village to tell the parents of her children that there would be no school that day as she was very unwell.

She sat by the open window, or rather lay, with her head back on a pillow, faint and sick. Her face had thinned since Stretton saw the beauty of it, and to-day the deep carnation of her cheeks had almost faded. Her eyes were closed, and she breathed so softly and was so very still that she might have been the image of beautiful Death.

She was thinking in a dreamy mist of thought, in which nothing was defined, and nothing clear except a feeling of fear. She could no longer go on like this. In a little while her secret must be known. What would she do? To what place could she go for sanctuary from the rude eyes of the village? She had not a relation in the world and hardly a friend. David? He was her friend. He had said he would help her in any time of trouble. Oh, she would be glad to go to David! He was so kind and strong and wise. But she would be ashamed. No, she could not go to David. She must bear her loneliness. She must grapple with

this deadly fear that was crushing out her courage. Why was she so weak? This terrible languor of body and soul!

There came a knock at the door. Was it a knock? She listened with a heart that beat so loudly that she could not tell whether *that* was the knocking. Yet it was a knock! It sounded again with a sharp tapping at the door.

She rose and went slowly into the hall, with her hand to her side, trying to steady her quick breathing. Then she opened the door and saw that her visitor was Miss Cecily.

"My dear, are you ill?"

The little lady looked at her anxiously, and then taking her hand led her into the sitting-room.

"I am a little queer to-day," said Alicia. "It is nothing, absolutely nothing."

She sat down quietly, and tried to hide her faintness.

Miss Cecily looked round the room with a timid glance, and then going down suddenly upon her knees before Alicia took her hands, her own faded, withered, little hands trembling excitedly.

"My dear," she said in a kind of whisper. "My dear . . . what is the matter with you?"

"I have a little headache," said Alicia.

"Is it nothing more than that?" said Miss Cecily, and as she gazed with a strange searching look into Alicia's face the schoolmistress veiled her eyes and flushed deeply. She put a hand to her bosom.

"Yes," she said. "It is something more." She looked up and met the elderly lady's gaze, and her confession was made in that moment.

Miss Cecily rose from her knees, and wrung her hands in a kind of anguish.

"Alicia!" she said presently, still in a whisper. "You . . . of all women! How could you! How could you!"

A tiny smile fluttered for a moment about Alicia's lips.

"I am a woman," she said.

Miss Cecily began to cry gently, and wiped the tears away as they welled into her blue eyes.

"I cannot understand it . . . it is a great shock to me. What poor Agnes will say I really do not know."

"I hope she will not love me any less," said Alicia.

Miss Cecily put out a trembling hand.

"My dear . . . you . . . you do not know poor Agnes. I have left her in a state of great nervous excitement. She says that if it is true it will be the greatest disgrace to Long Stretton."

"Are they talking about me already?" said Alicia with a sudden look of fear.

"It was Mr. Cartwright," said Miss Cecily, breaking down now into sobs. "He spoke to poor Agnes privately, and . . . and warned her of your condition. When she told me I vowed he was speaking falsely . . . but, oh! . . . my dear, that it is true is worse! How could you! Alicia! How could you!"

She mopped her eyes with a delicate lace handkerchief, and Alicia was touched by her grief.

"Do *you* think badly of me?" she said, with tender reproach. "Do *you* shrink from me as a sinner? Oh, do not let your dear heart be spoilt by cruelty."

Miss Cecily took her hand again and pressed it convulsively.

"You are a good woman . . . I can believe nothing bad of you, my dear, but . . . poor child, what is the truth? Who is the villain that . . . ?"

Alicia paled.

"Do not call him *that!*" she said faintly.

Miss Cecily flared into a little fury.

"Oh, he must be a very wicked man, whoever it is. That he should have brought *you* to shame, Alicia!"

"Not to shame!" said Alicia quickly. "I am not ashamed! I shall be *proud* to be a mother."

Miss Cecily looked at her in timid surprise.

"Do you mean that? Are you not ashamed? . . . I . . . I do not understand!"

"Is it a shame to bring a child into the world?"

Alicia's eyes glowed with anger. "Oh, I hate the cruelty which is called purity. I hate those hard people who will stone a woman because she has been willing to suffer motherhood without legal sanction or church ceremony. That is Christianity! But there is little of Christ in it!" She checked her wildness, seeing the terror of Miss Cecily at what was blasphemy to her.

"Forgive me!" she said. "Forgive me! But surely *you* understand, dear Miss Cecily! You have desired the joys of love and motherhood. You will not hate me because my desire for love was stronger than prudence!"

Miss Cecily bowed her head, which was shaking tremulously.

"I am a hypocrite. . . . God forgive me! . . . I came to reproach you, my dear, and yet I know that in my young days if love had come to me I should have gone to meet it without any prudence."

There was a silence, and the little lady bled at the heart in self-pity because her life had been without love, and from that moment she had no blame for Alicia, but infinite tenderness and pity, that was not without a little secret envy.

But presently her fears came back, for she knew that punishment awaits the woman who breaks the social law.

"My dear, what are you going to do? You cannot stay here. What shall I say to Miss Agnes? She is inflexible and unforgiving in such a case as this. She is terribly scandalised. I fear she will never speak to you again."

"I am sorry for that," said Alicia. "But I see that I cannot stay here. I must go away . . . at once."

"Will you go to *him*?" said Miss Cecily timidly. "Surely there is no reason why he should not marry

you. He is in a good place now, I hear. He could well afford to keep you."

Alicia raised her head and stared at the lady with astonished eyes. "Do you know who it is?" she said faintly.

Miss Cecily flushed, with a look of painful embarrassment.

"It was the Vicar who told my sister. He said there was only one man who could be accused."

"Who?"

Alicia sat up in her chair, gripping its long arms.

"I suppose he was right. I have long guessed David's love for you."

Alicia gasped.

"David!" she cried in a hoarse voice. "Did he say David?"

"Yes, my poor child. It was not difficult to guess. And the Vicar said he has another proof."

Alicia rose, white to the lips, and there was passionate anger in her eyes.

"How dare he!" she said, clenching her hands. "How dare he!"

"It cannot be kept secret. All the village knows your friendship with him."

"With David?"

The anger in Alicia's eyes faded out, leaving a look of absolute dismay.

"Oh, God!" she cried. "Will they think *that*?"

She sank down and buried her face in the sofa,

weeping passionately and hysterically. Then, suddenly, as Miss Cecily bent over her with soothing words, she became quite quiet, and slipped to the floor in a deep swoon.

CHAPTER XXVII

THAT night all the village knew that Alicia Frensham, the schoolmistress, was dangerously ill. The windows in her little house were ablaze with light, and outside the garden-gate the doctor's horse was tethered to the hedge. For an hour or more a little group of men and women stood in the darkness talking in low voices and staring up at the bedroom window, where occasionally the shadow of Dr. Bramwell passed across the blind. Sudden illness is always a cause of excitement in village life, and there had been dramatic incidents in this case. Miss Cecily had been seen flying down the little street to the doctor's house, and a few minutes later the doctor himself sprang into his saddle and galloped furiously to Alicia's cottage. Then Miss Cecily walked back, panting for breath. She stopped at Mrs. Orpington's, the washerwoman and village nurse, and after a brief conversation hurried her off to the little school-house. By the round O of Mrs. Orpington's mouth and the solemnity of her old pippin face the villagers knew that something out of the ordinary had happened to Miss Frensham. Rumours chased each other down the high street. In the allsorts shop Mrs. Goodyear heard tell that scarlet fever had come like a roaring beast to Long Stretton. An hour

later, and a few doors further up, Mrs. Featherfew gasped out the awful word smallpox, which she had heard from the grocer's assistant at the Stores, who had had it from the haberdasher's young lady. Further excitement had been caused by an interchange of notes between the school-house and the Hall. Miss Cecily had come to Miss Frensham's door and, in a high quavering voice, had called for a volunteer to carry the letter to Miss Agnes. It was the butcher's boy who sprang first to the occasion, the others having hung back with a dread of infection. Half an hour later he came bounding back with an answer, and a long tale of how Miss Wingfield had been white and skeery when she wrote the letter as he waited. It was then that the rumour of smallpox reached the group of waiters in the lane, sending a shudder among them and dispersing them quickly.

"Better not stay here, ladies and gentlemen," said Mr. Toms, the barber, in a hollow voice. "We must think of our wives and childer. The pox is a poxy thing, and very secretive." He moved off down the lane like a bell-wether, and the others followed as sheep, and huddled together with a common fear.

Only one remained, and he stayed in the darkness for an hour more, standing quite motionless with his hands resting on a gnarled stick. It was Jonathan Heath, who, at the news of Alicia's illness, had been plunged into deep reproachfulness for the sullen way in which he had behaved to her of late. All his resentment had been melted now by the remembrance of

the many gracious hours she had spent in his workshop, and of her generous gift of friendship which had been to him a new intellectual awakening and an education. Strong, simple man, it was intolerable to him to be inactive while Alicia was ill. If only he could serve her by muscular exertion, by riding on some errand, by hammering something out of hot iron for her! Jonathan waited until the doctor came away from the house, and then went up to him as he unhitched his horse.

"Be it good news or bad, Doctor?" he asked, anxiously.

Doctor Bramwell started at this figure looming suddenly out of the darkness, but he recognised Jonathan by his height and voice.

"It was touch and go, my man. But she's right now. Nature will do the rest."

"Praise the Lord," said Jonathan.

"That's right enough. We doctors never get any thanks."

He gave a short laugh as he got on to his horse and took it at a canter down the lane. Upstairs in the bedroom Alicia lay still moaning, not now in pain of body, but in despair.

Miss Cecily sat by her side fondling her hand. The little lady's eyes were red with weeping, but now her eyes glowed with thankfulness that Alicia was out of danger.

"I have nothing to live for now," said Alicia. "Why has God, or Fate, or whatever the Power may be, allowed this cruelty? Why am I denied my child?"

"Perhaps it is best, my dear," said Miss Cecily gently. "It saves you from much suffering and shame."

Alicia groaned bitterly, and turned her head away from Miss Cecily.

"I do not mean that you would deserve the shame, my poor friend," said the lady soothingly. "But the world is very cruel, and you are a woman."

"Yes—I am a woman!"

Alicia laughed faintly, and her eyes glowed with anger.

"Men go their way carelessly. It is the weak woman who bears the pain and is stoned for it. Oh, Christian charity!"

"My dear," said Miss Cecily, "the world is hard because it forgets the charity of Christ. I pray that I may remember it."

Alicia's eyes flooded with a sudden gush of tears, and she pressed Miss Cecily's hand upon the coverlet.

"You are all that is sweet and loving. I owe my life to you. Oh . . . but it is hard that I have lost that other life!" She wept broken-heartedly, and Miss Cecily could not soothe her.

CHAPTER XXVIII

AFTER her breakdown Alicia recovered her health in a way that was surprising and even humiliating to herself. Her grief was so intense that she would gladly have given up life as now a hopeless thing. Yet in three days, so wonderful is nature when youth is on its side, that she was able to leave her bed and lie upon the couch in her small parlour by the open window through which the scent of roses came. Miss Cecily called every day with jellies and other comforts, and the village folk vied with each other in bringing little gifts of eggs and fruit and flowers. The smallpox rumour had been quickly disproved, and they were rather ashamed of having listened to the lie.

On the sixth day, when Alicia was quite convalescent, she received a note from Miss Agnes Wingfield. She opened it reluctantly, knowing that whatever words were in it would wound her. Miss Agnes had not once called at the school-house, and from certain timid phrases let fall by Miss Cecily, Alicia knew that the elder lady could not forgive her.

But the letter stabbed her cruelly. She loved Miss Agnes for her many gracious qualities, and for that reason each sentence smote her as a blow.

"Madam," the letter began, and Alicia paled as the

cold word met her eye, "I have waited until you were in a state of health strong enough, I trust, to read with calmness what I write with pain. It is not necessary for me to tell you how terribly my dear sister and I have suffered from this shame that has come to us through your sin. We gave you our friendship—I will not enlarge on that—and you betrayed our trust. We had so much confidence in your virtue and propriety that we placed you in charge of the innocent little children of our village school. To know that *you* of all young women should have succumbed to temptation is still almost incredible. It is, indeed, a grievous reflection upon my dear sister and myself, who should have been more watchful and prudent. I have permitted my dear sister, whose tender heart bleeds even for the worst of sinners, to comfort and nurse you during your illness. But I must beg you to understand that this Christian charity is in no way a sign of forgiveness for what to all good and pure women is an unpardonable sin. Henceforth our friendship towards you is at an end, though the memory of your innocent days and of the happiness we had in your companionship will always remain to us as a great and bitter regret for so deplorable an ending.

"You will, of course, not fail to resign your position as mistress of Long Stretton School. Our responsibility to the poor children makes this immediately necessary. I pray that God may grant you His mercy and that He may restore you to His infinite grace.

"AGNES WINGFIELD."

Alicia read the letter until the end, when her tears blinded her. Then tearing it into small bits she let them fall upon the floor. She had reached the depths of anguish, and in her lonely room she struggled with a deadening despair. That afternoon she wrote an answer to the letter:—

“I resign my position as mistress of Long Stretton School, where I have tried to do my duty. I am grateful for the loving goodness shown to me by all in the village, and I shall never forget the infinite kindness of you and Miss Cecily.”

An hour after this note had been sent up to the Hall by the little maidservant the postmistress came with a telegram.

Alicia returned the greeting of the woman and closed the door upon her before she opened the pink envelope.

Her heart leapt within her with a sudden and terrible excitement. The telegram was from Stretton Wingfield.

“Have just received six letters not delivered because of constantly changing address. Am overwhelmed with sorrow and self-reproach. Come to me. My love awaits you.—STRETTON, 10, Duke St., St. James’s, London, W.”

Alicia gave a great cry and fell face downwards upon the floor with her arms outstretched.

CHAPTER XXIX

ON the afternoon of the next day Alicia stood on the platform at Victoria. The first fog of the autumn filled the station with a damp grey mist through which the electric lights gleamed with a clouded radiance. A crowd of people waited for an outgoing train, eddying backwards and forwards behind the line of porters clamouring for luggage from the passengers in Alicia's train, which had just arrived. She stayed motionlessly under one of the lamps, her brain dazed by the dull roar and by the tangle of humanity. She watched the line of cabs move slowly down the further side of the platform as those in front drove away into a whirlpool at the entrance, with hoarse shouts and the clack of whips.

A few people waiting for friends turned to look at her—this solitary woman in black, whose quietude was strangely in contrast to the general restlessness. The electric light made a glamour about her, accentuating the shadows under her eyes and the pallor of her face. Three portmanteaux lay around her, and as she stood with her face slightly raised, and her eyes gazing into the station distances, utterly unobservant of individuals, she was a picture for a French impressionist.

Manet would have caught that attitude of patient expectancy, and the mysticism of her face.

A man fought his way through the crowds to her and took her hands.

"Alicia!"

It was Stretton Wingfield. He looked at her with a kind of shame, and spoke in a voice that was strange to her.

"How ill you look—and how beautiful! My God, what a brute I have been to you!"

Alicia's face flamed with a sudden joy.

"Stretton . . . my love!"

He gripped a porter's arm and pointed to the bags. Then he guided Alicia swiftly towards the line of hansom cabs, and hailed one. As they drove out of the station, he took her hand again, stroking it gently. He could find no words but those of self-reproach and passionate excuses.

"I have been a brute . . . utterly selfish. . . . I was so rushed with work I could not find time to write . . . hardly to eat. . . . Those letters lay at my flat. I ought to have sent for them. I have been a brute! My poor child!"

She let her head slip to his shoulder and wept quietly with excess of joy.

"I should not have written those stupid letters," she said presently. "Forgive me, Stretton. I was too impatient."

"You?"

Stretton laughed bitterly.

"I shall never forgive myself!"

"I doubted your love. I have been wicked. But let us forget all that. I am dazed with joy."

She sat forward in the cab drinking in the moist, misty air, breathing in the sour smell of the streets, and dazzling her eyes with the flare of the shop windows.

"London!" she said, as they drove through the Green Park, where the long vista of lights gleamed before them, and a constant stream of carriages passed with flashing lamps, to the tune of jingling bells and harness, and with a swirling noise as of rushing waters. She breathed quickly and gave a low, excited laugh.

"Glorious!" she whispered to herself.

They were held up in the traffic by Marlborough House. A dense block of carriages waited their turn to drive through the gates. Through their windows Alicia caught glimpses of women in white gowns, their flesh gleaming softly, and with glittering jewels. By the side of some there were men in scarlet uniforms, or in naval blue.

"Who are they—all those people? Where are they going?"

"It's Marlborough House. The Prince gives a dinner to-night."

A carriage moved close and then got jammed close to the cab. An elderly man in Court dress unfastened the window, leaning forward on his seat to stare at Stretton and Alicia. It was a thin, clean-shaven, distinguished-looking man, and a smile played about his thin lips.

"Good evening, Stretton," he said, with a laugh which to Alicia did not seem altogether pleasant.

She felt Stretton suddenly stiffen at her side. He gave a start as the voice greeted him. Then he laughed, too, nervously.

"Hullo!" he said. "Doing the gold-stick business?"

He went forward to hide Alicia from the man's cool stare.

"Yes, my Individual youth! I suppose you are too much of a democrat to envy me, eh? Or do you sometimes put off the democrat pose?"

"Wait till the House meets," said Stretton, with a more natural gaiety. "We are going to make things move!"

"You will certainly add to the gaiety of nations, my amiable young ass! Well, au revoir!"

He leant back with another laugh, and the carriage moved forward in the *queue* and disappeared through the gates of Marlborough House.

"Who is that?" said Alicia. "I don't like him, whoever he is."

"My worthy uncle, Lord Hugh Unstead, the Minister of War. What a coincidence that he should have come alongside like that! Confound him!"

He sat back and was silent as the hansom now shot forward through the two lines of carriages.

"We shall not be alone until late to-night," he said, as he took Alicia's hand and helped her out of the hansom. "It is a terrible nuisance, but I could not

postpone a dinner to the party leaders. It is our first rendezvous. Do you mind, Alicia?"

Alicia's eyes widened with a frightened look. She turned on the doorstep and gazed into the dark and quiet little street.

"I shall be in your way, Stretton. Shall I go somewhere else . . . to some hotel?"

Stretton laughed softly.

"Hush! This is your home now."

He opened the door with his latch-key, and Alicia looked into a lighted hall, the walls covered with old engravings and hunting trophies.

A manservant came forward quickly.

"The gentlemen are here, sir."

"Never mind the gentlemen. Fetch in the bags."

Alicia still hesitated on the doorstep.

"Stretton," she whispered, "are you sure you want me?"

He took her hand, and started to find it stone cold.

"My dear! How cold you are!" he said in a low voice. Then he drew her into the hall and took off her fur boa.

"I told them to make a fire in your bedroom. Let me take you up at once."

He put her arm through his own, and took her up the stairs. On the landing he whispered the words, "Courage, darling."

In the bedroom, lit with the soft light of many candles and a glowing fire, Alicia stood silently and swayed a little.

Stretton strode towards her and put his arms about her.

"My dear . . . you are not ill? . . . You are happy . . . and trust me?"

She struggled for composure. "No, I am not ill. . . . a little faint, that is all. . . . It is all so strange . . . so wonderful!"

She put her hands upon his shoulders and let her head drop upon his breast.

"Stretton . . . you are not making a mistake? . . . You want me to live with you? . . . You have not lost your love for me?"

She panted, and Stretton saw that she was moved with a great emotion.

He pressed her close to him.

"I love you better than life. I cannot do without you. By God's truth I will be good to you!"

He spoke passionately in a low voice. Then as he heard the baggage being brought upstairs he stepped quickly to the door.

"We will wait dinner for you," he said. "Dress as you like. There are no other ladies."

His eyes met those of Alicia, and he saw that they were moist with tears. But a colour had come into her face, and she smiled at him with infinite tenderness.

As he went downstairs his lips moved and his hand trembled on the baluster. From the dining-room came the sound of men's voices and laughter. He paused before the door, breathing heavily, and from the iron lamp, swinging above, the light fell upon a rather hag-

gard and very serious face. He swept it with a hand, and forced a smile as he opened the door.

The laughter pealed at him, and then there was a shout of "Wingfield! Wingfield!" and a fluty voice which asked, "Where the devil's that dinner, young man?"

CHAPTER XXX

"Good luck to the Individualists," said Stretton. "I only wish there were more of us!"

"What we lack in quantity we have in quality," said the fluty voice—which belonged to Hilary Osgood, the "Dainty Desmoulins" of the halfpenny Press. He wore a velvet dinner jacket, and since Stretton had last seen him he had grown his hair longer, and its gold gleamed round a fair boyish face, singularly sweet and merry.

"Yes," said a deep and rather hoarse voice, "we look a pretty set of scoundrels, don't we? Our little friend Hilary, *par exemple*, is a typical leader of revolution!"

The man who spoke was Cuthbert Waynefleet, the author of *Individualism*, which Stretton had called the new Magna Charta.

Hilary sang a bar of "La Marseillaise" and bowed to Wingfield. "Vive l'Empereur!" he cried gaily.

A tall, gaunt, long-nosed man, Lord Percival Percy, raised a drawling voice.

"We have had a devil of a time. Those women! . . . Well, thank heaven it's all over."

"It's just beginning, old Praise-God-Bare-Bones, and don't you make no mistake," said Hilary.

"We'll have a run for our money," said a sporting-looking young man who happened to be Lord John Hutton. "Don't funk the ditches, is my motto, and a dashed good one."

"None of your beastly stable slang, Johnny," said Hilary Osgood. "Remember, you're a legislator."

"I'm dashed if I am," said Lord John. "I'm an Individualist, I take it!"

There was a burst of laughter.

"Be quite sure, dear boy," said Hilary. "Don't make a mistake in the House and vote on the Government side."

"Well, I'm a sportsman," said Lord John placidly. "I'll follow the Whip."

"Like a hound," said Hilary.

"Stretton, my noble chief," said a whimsical person who had a distinct resemblance to George Grossmith, junior. "Forgive me for reminding you that, intellectual as we are, our flesh is weak. Where—in the pointed phrase of our friend Hilary—where the devil is that dinner?"

"Lord Edward Moorhouse," said Hilary, "remember your manners, and try to be a gentleman. You won't succeed, but there's nothing like trying."

Stretton pulled out his cigar-case and handed it to Lord Edward.

"Take a weed, Teddy, it'll help you to wait a bit longer." There was a general dismay.

"Wait?" cried Hilary Osgood, falling backwards

with a light grace. "Those also serve who only stand and wait!" Alas, I cannot stand, I faint."

"Mine host," said the deep bass of Cuthbert Wayne-fleet, "I should be loth to call a pox upon your house. But as one of us has well observed, in a particularly bright epigram, the flesh is weak."

"I am sorry," said Stretton calmly. "But I am expecting a lady to join us. We cannot begin without her."

There was a sudden silence, which was interrupted by a ripple of laughter from Hilary Osgood.

"Tout vient à qui sait attendre. Cherchez la femme! Ce n'est que la premier pas qui coûte! Liberté! Egalité! Fraternité! Pip! Pip!"

He hummed the "Marseillaise" again with an agreeable smile. Lord Percival Percy walked over to Stretton with a blank stare.

"I say, old boy. This is hardly playing the game, is it? If you'll excuse me I'll be going. Important engagement. Beastly sorry, you know."

"Sit down," said Stretton. "Don't be a damned idiot."

"As a sportsman," said Lord John Hutton, "I object to a dark horse."

"It's a mare, you ass," said Hilary.

Stretton flushed angrily.

"Look here, you fellows," he said quietly. "I suppose you weren't brought up in Houndsditch?"

"Houndsditch?" said Hilary. "Hounds-ditch. Twig? Very neat that. Ha! ha!"

"The lady I am going to ask you to meet," said Stretton, "is not accustomed to cads. Perhaps you will remember you are gentlemen."

"Oh lor, are we?" said Hilary. "Now, who'd have thought it?"

"I'm an Individualist," said John Hutton.

Cuthbert Waynefleet bore down their voices. His heavy face, pockmarked and square-jowled, frowned on the other men.

"When I behave with any discourtesy to a woman, may my soul go straight to hell!"

"I second that proposition," said Hilary, with his exquisite smile.

The door opened, and Stretton's man announced Alicia Frensham.

She came into a silent room.

She wore a black lace dress with a white point collar, a simple gown that became her tall figure. Her brown-red hair was looped loosely at the back, and she held her head high. She did not show the nervousness that possessed her, and the expression of her serious eyes and sensitive mouth was softened by a rather wistful smile as she went across to Stretton.

"I have not kept you waiting too long?" she asked.

Stretton's friends looked at her curiously and with astonishment, in which perhaps there was a little shame. They had not expected, though perhaps they could not have explained why, a woman of this unusual and spiritual beauty. Perhaps Stretton's character had led them to expect another type of woman. Hilary

Osgood drew in his breath quickly, and the impudence of his expression was for the moment extinguished.

"We have not been too impatient," said Stretton, smiling in answer to her question. He felt the swift effect of Alicia's appearance on his guests, and his spirit was greatly elated. Her apparent self-possession, her quiet grace dispelled his anxiety as to her behaviour in a trying situation.

He took her hand and led her to Cuthbert Waynefleet, who bowed deeply with an old-fashioned dignity.

"You know Mr. Waynefleet by name, Alicia? Here he is in the flesh—the father of Individualism. His is the spirit that moves us."

Waynefleet took the hand Alicia held out to him, and bent low over it.

"Our friend Wingfield is always generous with his words. My spirit, madam, is fettered by the flesh, which as you see is gross. But I am your servant."

A smile flickered in Alicia's eyes.

"I have heard you will always be master," she said. There was a laugh at this, but Waynefleet looked at her seriously.

"They accuse me of an overbearing temper," he said. "It is an outrageous lie, madam. I am as gentle as a dove."

"When everybody gives way to him," said Hilary.

Alicia smiled at the young painter, who had moved towards her.

"You are Mr. Hilary Osgood, are you not?" she said. "I recognise you by Stretton's description."

"What cruelty!" cried Hilary. "I shrink at the thought of Wingfield's witticisms. He does not spare his friends."

"Oh, I flattered you," said Stretton, laughing. "To describe you as you are would be too candid a caricature."

"Miss Frensham," said Hilary earnestly, "believe me that the diabolical appearance that my mother gave me hides an innocent and guileless heart."

Alicia looked at the face, with its daintily clear-cut features and girlish mouth, and she laughed with a merriment that was infectious to the others.

Stretton did not introduce them all to her.

"You will pick them out later on," he said. "As Individualists they are more or less individual, and they cannot get away from their portraits in the half-penny papers."

"Yes, we are labelled for life," said Hilary. "What we shall do when we become respectable——"

"You never will," said Stretton. "But let us eat and be merry. Waynesfleet, will you take in Miss Frensham?"

He opened the door, and Cuthbert Waynesfleet lumbered over to Alicia and gave her his arm with grave deference.

"I am not worthy," he said. The other men fell back to let them pass. Alicia's face was now flushed so that her beauty was more striking. But the anguish of her recent life had left its marks upon her, and on

her face there was always, as it were, the memory of pain.

Hilary held back to the last and whispered to Stretton—

“Who is she? Have you brought St. Cecilia back to life?”

Stretton took his arm and marched him off.

“Keep a civil tongue in your cheek, my impertinent cherub.”

At dinner there was silence over the first plates.

Cuthbert Waynfleet was hungry and lapped his soup steadily, and as he sat next to Alicia, the others, who were less interested in each other than in this new appearance at Stretton's table, followed his suit, though with less evident gusto. Stretton was becoming nervous again, and was afraid of the silence, without having the courage to break it. But when Cuthbert Waynfleet had eased his hunger pains he turned to Alicia and rolled out a sonorous stream of talk. With a genius for monopolising conversation, he made his own opening and plunged into a vivid description of a walk he had taken that afternoon in the slums of Westminster. He had met a dozen strange characters, from whom he had got their life stories over a bottle of wine in a dirty tavern. He seemed to have the habit of getting to the heart of any wretched human creature, and as a philosopher every one he met seemed a type, a personification of vice, or misery, or folly, or heroism. Alicia was fascinated, and hardly ate a morsel while listening to his grim, powerful portraits and pictures.

She had no need to answer him, even by conventional phrases, for he talked best when he had a good listener, and preferred a monologue.

But presently his natural courtesy put a check upon his tongue, and he endeavoured to give her equal opportunity.

"What do you think of the Election results, madam? They surprised you?"

Alicia was a little confused.

"I did not know there had been an Election. Has it taken place?"

Stretton flushed uneasily.

"Alicia!" he said, with a touch of annoyance in his voice. He felt, rather than saw, that these words had caused a sensation among his friends.

Cuthbert Waynesfleet laid down his knife and fork and gazed at Alicia with an amazement which changed gradually to admiration.

"Prodigious! Here in their egotism are gathered together the leaders of a new party who imagined they had made something of a stir in the world. England has been hideous with the vulgarity and obscene noise of party strife. Yet the gracious lady has not heard a rumour of it! Good God, what a lesson for the vanity of fools! Madam, I thank you, I thank you."

Alicia flushed deeply.

"I am stupid. But I . . . I have been ill. I have not seen a paper for a fortnight. Before then I followed all your movements and read all your speeches."

"You have been ill?" said Waynesfleet, with an

instant tenderness. "You grieve me. And I must have made your head ache with my foolish flow of words. I can hardly hope for forgiveness."

He poured out a glass of port wine.

"It will strengthen you," he said. "Pray give me the pleasure of seeing you drink it. Ah, that is better! I was afraid for a minute you might be too severe in the principles of temperance."

"Perhaps," he went on, with the object of covering Alicia's evident embarrassment, "London does not agree with you? To me it is the healthiest and happiest place in the world—and I have lived in many places of the world. But there are some natures, delicate and sensitive, who need the solitude and silence of the country. The noise of London appals them, and they are distressed in its world of streets. Do you find that so?"

"I have only been in London half-an-hour, and never before to-day. But in spite of living all my life in the country, I think I shall like the town best."

At this confession Hilary Osgood kicked Lord John Hutton on the shin so that he spilt his wine.

"You have never been in town before!" said Waynfleet, recovering from his surprise. "That is most interesting. I hope you will let me show you some of the wonders. I know every street and every alley of it, and I love each one of its grimy stones."

"Johnny," said Hilary Osgood to his neighbour in a low voice while Waynfleet went on speaking, "I have a theory."

"I wish you'd keep your feet to yourself."

"My theory," said Hilary, "is that our young friend Stretton has been playing Pygmalion, and has brought another Galatea to life."

"I don't mind taking a sporting bet with you," said John Hutton, "that her father is a country clergyman."

"Hush!" said Hilary, looking scared. "She's not one of *that* sort."

"What's she here for?" said Horsy Hutton, as he was sometimes called.

"If she ain't a goddess, she's a saint," said Hilary.

"Ah!" said Lord John. "I never put my money on a saint; d'ye remember Saint Agatha? She broke my jockey's back at the first hedge."

"Did she, by Jove!" said Hilary. He looked earnestly at Alicia, and then at Stretton Wingfield.

"I fancy one of us will come a cropper."

The conversation among the others had become more general, and there was a lively rally on the subject of literary London. Stretton and Waynefleet tried to trip each other over the localities where famous writers had lived. They both were at fault over the house where Shelley dwelt in his youth. It was Alicia who put them right.

"Was it not in Poland Street? I remember reading in the biography of his friend Hogg how Shelley was attracted by the trellised paper, and touching the wall said, 'We must stay here for ever!'"

Cuthbert Waynefleet patted her hand approvingly.

"Well done! Well done!" he said. "You have never been to London, yet you have beaten us all."

Naturally in any conversation on literary London the works of Charles Dickens came up for review. It is an evidence of the wide and wonderful popularity of Dickens that in almost any company the remembrance of his character reveals enthusiasm and knowledge. Stretton, Waynefleet, Moorhouse, Hilary Osgood, and even Percy, who hitherto had been quite silent, joined in the tracking down of Dickensian characters in the highways and byways of London. Alicia gave them the lead, and baffled them several times by naming characters which they had forgotten until she recalled the scenes in which they appeared. She mentioned Tom All-alone in *Bleak House*.

"I can imagine that gloomy place, with its iron railings, looking through into the dark courtyard, where rats scrambled for the scraps. Does it still exist?"

Waynefleet was the only man who knew the spot, and he launched into a eulogy of Dickens' wonderful realism. "But it is impertinent of me," he said, touching Alicia's hand with his great paw. "I thought I knew my Dickens, but you have revealed my ignorance."

"Alicia is a great reader," said Stretton. He was happy that she had impressed these men of culture like Waynefleet and Osgood, and he flashed a look of warm approval at her, which she answered with a grateful smile. After dinner Stretton took his guests back to the

smoking-room, where Hilary Osgood sat down to the piano and sang gay little French songs in a charming tenor, while the other men talked politics with Stretton over cigars and coffee. Alicia sat by Hilary, and it was to her he sang, swinging round between each song to explain the meaning of the old French words.

"Now it is your turn," he said. "These little foolish things have been but the chirruping of cherubs to St. Cecilia."

"I do not sing," said Alicia.

"Not sing?" said Hilary. "Why you sing with your eyes, and there is music in your hair and in the movement of your hands! When you speak I hear the thrill of harp strings, and when you laugh it is the song of running water."

Alicia laughed softly at his serious foolishness, and he listened to her with his head on one side and with devout expression.

"*Et cum spiritu tuo*," he said, as if her laughter were a benediction.

From that moment he called her St. Cecilia, and it pleased him when she dubbed him "*Bambino mio*."

Stretton, listening with one ear to a monologue by Cuthbert Waynefleet, watched Alicia as Hilary prattled to her, and she, feeling in some instinctive way that his gaze was upon her, turned once or twice to send him a message of the eyes across the room. His pulse throbbed, and he was nervously excited. Remorse flogged him as he thought of his carelessness and forget-

fulness of the beautiful woman. These men admired her; Hilary, the spoilt plaything of duchesses and smart women, fastidious man and almost *blasé*, was in awe of her, and at her feet. Cuthbert Waynfleet had whispered to him in his violent way that she was the most "exquisite soul who did honour to the Almighty, and was as wise as she was good."

What a blackguard he had been to her! And yet he had not really forgotten her. He had never meant to forsake her. Directly the fierce excitement of the Election was over he had felt the need of this pure and restful soul. And when those letters had reached him it was not without passionate remorse and an irresistible yearning that he had read her words of love and bitterness and final reproach. He was not worthy of her. But he would make amends. By all that was holy, he would do his best to make her happy!

When his friends took their leave he watched with a secret pleasure with what reverence and courtesy they bent over Alicia's hand. He was thankful they had behaved well, and had not treated Alicia with the familiarity they would have shown to another type of woman.

When they were all gone she came to him and put her arms on his shoulders, all her gaiety dying out.

"Thank God! we are alone at last," she said.

"You behaved splendidly, my dear."

"Oh! . . . it was a great strain! . . . Stretton, let me sit at your feet, and forget everything in your love!"

The candles burned dim, and then flickered and faded out, and only the firelight glowed upon Stretton as through the hours Alicia's head rested upon his knees, and he spoke of his remorse, of his love, of his desire to make her happy, and of all the good days that the future held for them.

CHAPTER XXXI

To Alicia Frensham London was a wonderland, through which she roamed during four weeks dreamily. Or rather it seemed to her as if she had been asleep during all her former life and was now awake. She exulted in the tumult of the streets as a Midland man or woman who first visits the coast and is excited by the sound and fury of the sea. She loved the crowd, and came from the jostlings and hubbub with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes. Yet she loved also the quietude of back streets and such haunts of ancient peace as the courtyards of the Temple and the Abbey cloisters, where she went with Stretton and lingered silently, with old memories and old ghosts about her. She had a child-like desire for exploration and a curiosity that was never satisfied. A dark alley with an archway in Fleet Street or the Strand was a temptation to stray from the straight path of a journey which she could not resist, and plucking at Stretton's sleeve, she led him into narrow courts or slummy little streets in spite of his laughing protests.

"I like to know what is at the back of things."

Her imagination was stirred by things that seemed commonplace to Stretton. The tablet in the house in Bread Street to the memory of Milton made her

thrill with excitement. Before Cleopatra's Needle on the Embankment she stood long, and as though she looked backwards through the three thousand years when it was first raised on Egyptian sands. In Westminster Abbey she was shocked at Stretton's levity about the sculptured monuments. She did not see how hideous many of them are, how horribly disconcerting in this place of solemn peace where Death and Time show the stupidity of fame. She was thrilled with thoughts of the dust that lay beneath them, and her instincts of art were destroyed here by her historical imagination. The atmosphere of the Abbey and its dim majesty overwhelmed her, and to Stretton's alarm she suddenly disappeared from his side, and he found her in the cloisters in tears.

To Stretton these weeks of sight-seeing with her were surpassingly pleasant. He forgot himself in studying the woman at his side, whose freshness of emotion and impression gave him a new sense of enjoyment in life, and brought back something of his old boyishness. Her astonishing simplicity and the purity of her nature took the sting from the vague feeling of uneasiness with which he sometimes regarded their unconventional alliance. He fooled himself into a sense of security and virtue which enabled him to enjoy her presence as if—so he put it to himself in a pretty phrase—she were his sister. The passion of his first love for her seemed to have left him—though sometimes the touch of her hand, or the glint of gold in her hair, or the tremulous quiver of her throat when

she was excited thrilled him. But, as he argued with inward satisfaction, she was now a quiet and refreshing influence, a source of intellectual sweetness, in which he could forget for a time the hot ambitions and his restlessness. It was characteristic of him that after a harassing political campaign, with the excitement of a parliamentary session before him, he abandoned himself absolutely to an interregnum of love-in-idleness. Yet they were seldom alone, not really alone, as they had been at Long Stretton in the school-house. Wingfield's bachelor friends came to his house in Duke Street at all times of the day—Hilary Osgood arriving even at breakfast-time on many mornings. As a painter he allowed himself the privileges of Bohemianism, among which was the habit of visiting at an early hour. It was impossible to resent his intrusion, at least to a man of Stretton's temperament, for he brought an early morning sunshine with him.

"There is one thing," he said, "which makes me sigh at my bachelorhood. I cannot eat my breakfast alone in a studio which reeks of last night's cigars and the rumpled memories of midnight conversation. Stretton, dear noble friend, let me pay for my breakfast with you if you will, but do not deny me your morning table."

Stretton was accustomed to this little habit of Hilary's, which had been amusing enough in his single days, but now that Alicia served the coffee he was inclined to protest against this domiciliary visit. But Hilary ignored his frown and his coolness, and with

a charming grace served his host with his own bacon, while he regaled him also with tit-bits of gossip and news. So it happened that in their morning expeditions Hilary often accompanied them, swearing that to-day he felt in a holiday mood, and would rather face a tiger than a blank canvas. Indeed, he had always a hundred suggestions for the entertainment of Alicia, and argued in their favour with such sham eloquence that Stretton would have to let him take the lead for the sake of peace while he read the newspaper. And Alicia was amused beyond measure by the Bambino, as she called him.

"What a child it is!" she said to Stretton. "And to think that he is a member of Parliament!"

"Unless ye become as little children," said Hilary, who had heard the remark, "ye shall not enter the House of Commons."

He insisted on taking them to the Zoo one day, and Stretton had a pang of jealousy, swift and sudden, so that it brought the blood to his face, when he saw Alicia and Hilary sitting on the side saddle of an elephant and holding hands like two babies. He had refused to take part in such childishness, protesting that old age sat too heavily on his shoulders to permit of such a public exhibition. But as he stayed by the ladders and saw Hilary's ecstatic look and Alicia's smiling face, as the great beast lumbered off, he felt this stupid resentment at the familiarity between his friend and his . . . mistress. The word by which he called her slipped

into his thoughts unconsciously, and then he became aware of it and was curiously shocked. *His mistress!* Yes, that was the plain brutal truth of it. His friends had not said a word about his relations with this woman in his house. They had taken everything for granted, as men of the world do in such cases. But among themselves they would talk about it. And they would call her by a coarser name, "Wingfield's keep." That was the modern way of putting it. Hilary up there, looking as discreet as a cherub, told stories in the smoking-room that would make the devil blush. He behaved with propriety to Alicia, but in his mind she was just "Wingfield's keep". . . . Damn him.

Stretton stuffed his last bun into an elephant's trunk, and paced up and down moodily till the other beast came back. His imagination was startled by a look into the future. What was he going to do with Alicia? What would happen when she found out, as inevitably she must do, that she was not an honest woman in the eyes of the men who were so amiable to her . . . that they would never dream of introducing her to their sisters . . . that she was as much a social outcast as any painted woman in Piccadilly? By God! Could he trust Hilary, and the others who had praised Alicia's beauty and her serious grace? There was no honour among thieves, and where women were concerned they were all thieves. A black suspicion settled upon him, and when Alicia and Hilary came riding back Stretton's face was white and gloomy.

Hilary scampered down the ladder, and held out his hands to Alicia. She took them and jumped lightly to the ground with a ripple of laughter.

"It was great and glorious!" cried Hilary. "The spirit of eternal childhood has its home in the Zoo."

"Yes, you have all the characteristics of the monkey," said Stretton.

Alicia was startled by his tone of speech and by the ruffled expression of his face. She wondered what had happened to annoy him, and put her hand through his arm.

But Hilary was taken up with his own enjoyment.

"It is good for us to be here," he said. "Let us build three tabernacles, one for you, and one for Alicia, and one for me."

For the rest of the afternoon Wingfield was silent and *distract*, but Hilary's pranks and merriment kept Alicia laughing. His observations in the monkey-house brought a little group of people about them, much to Stretton's annoyance.

"How humanity caricatures its ancestors," said Hilary, pointing to a group of serious apes. "If only the House of Commons had the dignity of those primitive men!" He put a hand on Stretton's arm. "My dear old chap," he said, "look at that young baboon. It is absolutely like you! And that old chimpanzee, upon my soul he is the living image of my respected grandfather! How heredity does count!"

"I suppose you're a sort of throw-back," said

Stretton. "I've often wondered why you're so fond of nuts."

"Yes, and now I come to think of it, that's why you always put your feet on the mantel-piece," returned Hilary. "It's the nearest thing to hanging head downwards by your tail!"

Stretton smiled grimly, but his moodiness continued for the afternoon, until at last under the depressing influence of it even Hilary, after some wild adventures with jam tarts and a polar bear, suggested that it was time for a cab home. He slipped out at the corner of Portland Place, and kissed two hands to them through the window.

"A golden memory!" he said. "God bless you both."

Alicia put her hands into Stretton's.

"My dear, what is the matter? Have I annoyed you?"

"Aren't you getting a bit too friendly with that young jackanapes?" said Stretton with a touch of irritation.

Alicia was thoughtful.

"I will not speak to him again if you would rather not," she said. "I thought you wanted me to be friendly with your friends."

Stretton laughed, thrusting back his ill humour as he saw that he was on the verge of making himself ridiculous.

"Forgive me for being an ass! I had a stupid jeal-

ousy when I saw you playing the babe with Hilary! I found that I was feeling elderly and it gave me a twinge."

"Oh, Stretton," said Alicia tremulously. "You will never have cause for jealousy. I only live in your love. If I ever doubted *that* I think I should die."

"Do you ever doubt it?"

Stretton put his arm about her and pressed her to his side.

"Not now," said Alicia softly.

"Ah!" said Stretton, wincing. "You still remember my cruel carelessness!"

Alicia put her hands on his lips.

"I only remember your goodness to a lonely village girl. . . . Indeed, my dear, I remember nothing, but live only in this present dream."

This was the real truth. Since Alicia had come to London, she had not allowed herself to think in the past or in the future. Not in the past because the terror of those recent weeks and the loss of the child life to which she had looked forward so passionately remained as a deep wound which she dared not probe; and not in the future because to be with Stretton, to share his daily life, to live in the turmoil of London, to listen to the conversation of men who were distinguished in letters, in art, or in the social world, gave her no time or wish to peer into what was to come. . . .

Hilary was only one of the men who came to the quiet house in Duke Street. In the afternoon many of

the Individualists came to tea. Lord Edward Moorhouse, Stretton's "Teddy," was a frequent visitor. Alicia liked him because he seemed to her so typical of all she had read or imagined of the young English gentleman. He had not the whimsicality of Hilary or the eccentric beauty. He was a smart, well-groomed, clean-shaven man with no ideals, no literary taste or knowledge, and absolutely no pose. But he was fresh and wholesome, laughed easily and showed strong white teeth, was always amiable in a quiet, self-contained way, and had grey eyes that looked out upon the world with kindness. He had a profound respect for Stretton's intellect, knowing his own ignorance, and to Alicia he was always polite and attentive, eager to jump up to hand round cups when she poured out tea, and always ready to make conversation with her when the other men were taken up with their own arguments. He was the most ordinary and undistinguished of Stretton's visitors, but Alicia liked the plain, well-dressed young man with the brown face and tanned, well-kept hands.

For Lord John Hutton, with his stable slang and horsy manners, and for Lord Percival, with his drawl and stupid conceit, she had no liking at all but an instinctive aversion, which she tried to overcome for Stretton's sake, and Cuthbert Waynefleet did not altogether please her, for there was something about this unwieldy, heavy-faced man that gave her a vague dread of him. But, on the other hand, he fascinated her with his Johnsonian eloquence, his domineering

manners, his old-fashioned dignity, and his never-failing courtesy to herself.

She put a question one day to Stretton about him, so abruptly that he was rather startled.

"Is he really a bad man?" she said. "You once told me he was a libertine."

"Waynefleet?" said Stretton, with momentary hesitation. "Well, he is not an angel . . . but he is an intellectual giant, and in these days of pigmy people it is no use bothering about the private life of such a man."

He fulfilled his promise to Alicia to show her some of the sights of London, and arrived one day at eleven o'clock, dressed with rather more care than usual, in a frock-coat with full skirts, and a sword-stick under his arm, with an invitation to take her to the Tower.

"Don't you ask me, too?" said Stretton.

"No, my young friend, it is time you wrote an article for *The Tribune* on the future of Individualism or some other subject of 'light topical interest.' I could not be interrupted by cynical modern comments in the last stronghold of mediævalism."

"I have never been to the Tower in my life," said Stretton. "I thought only suburban fathers took their children there."

"That shows again the intellectual superiority of the suburbs."

Waynefleet would not listen to Stretton's wish to go with him, or to Alicia's pleadings on Stretton's behalf.

"This is my day out," he said, "and I prefer a *tête-à-tête* with madam. If she prefers not to come, let her say so, and I will beg forgiveness for my selfishness, and return to my article for the *New Encyclopædia*."

So Alicia went with him, a little reluctantly, but was soon bewitched by his vast store of knowledge and power of expression. He took the Tower as his test, and for three hours revealed to her the meaning of English history and the spirit of mediævalism. The stones spoke to him, and he met old ghosts in those grim walls. Alicia was strangely moved by his emotion. Over the stone on Tower Green, and in the chapel of St. Peter of the Chain, he wept quite frankly, great tears that rolled down his cheeks as he spoke of the fair and noble heads that had fallen, and of the great dust buried there. The poetry, the spiritism, the brutality and cruelty, the simple faith and endurance, the unconscious and self-conscious heroism of the Middle Ages became revealed to Alicia by this strange guide more vividly, and with more intense impressionism, than ever before, and her sensitive nature was excited painfully by the magic spell of his gloomy imagination and powerful impressionism.

"People call me a modern," he said, "because I pretend to deal with the political situation of the day, and to analyse the social conditions of this present civilisation. But by instinct I am a mediævalist. I should have been at home in Chaucer's days when individualism counted far more than now. Perhaps—who

knows?—I might have sat at the right hand of a king, and directed the destiny of a nation.”

Though he was a poor man and frugal in his habits, excepting the deep draughts of port wine in which he found warmth, he had taken Alicia to the Tower in a hansom, and as a symbol of magnificence, kept it waiting during the three hours of their visit. On the journey home he thanked Alicia in his grave courtly way for the great favour she had given him.

“It has been a day, madam, that I shall remember always. Such hours of imagination come only rarely in a lifetime. Only a woman—women are always generous and self-sacrificing—would have been so full of sympathy with a man of moodiness like me, a man gross and battered and ugly. I am deeply indebted to you.”

“It has been a wonderful day to me,” said Alicia quickly. “I, too, shall never forget it. I have learnt so much!”

“You have been very patient and beautiful,” said Waynefleet. “Beauty and patience are to me the best of virtues.”

“Is beauty a virtue?” said Alicia, smiling.

“The crown of virtue,” said Waynefleet earnestly.

“Alas, then!” said Alicia, “I have no crown.”

Waynefleet looked at her gravely again, and then in a strange and thrilling voice he said—

“By God, madam, you are much too beautiful and good for such as Stretton Wingfield.”

Alicia went white and shrank from his side.

"How dare you say that?" she said angrily.

"Nay," said Waynefleet hurriedly. "I meant nothing against my young friend. You are too good for any man less than a saint." He put his great hand on Alicia's and said gently, "Forgive me, forgive me, dear lady, you misinterpreted my words."

CHAPTER XXXII

HALF-WAY down Pall Mall, on their way home to Duke Street, Alicia suddenly put her hand on Cuthbert Waynefleet's arm, and in a queer voice said, "Will you stop the driver, please?"

Waynefleet thrust open the trap and called "Stop!" with a violence which caused the man to pull his horse on to its haunches.

"What is wrong?" said Waynefleet, searching the flushed face of the woman as she put the doors open.

"Nothing," said Alicia hurriedly, "but I see a friend of mine. . . . I must speak to him. Forgive me . . . and a thousand thanks."

She flashed a smile at him, so that the clouds that had gathered on his brow were almost dispelled.

As the hansom rattled off Waynefleet saw her race lightly through the crowd after a tall figure going down Pall Mall with a heavy stride.

The glimpse was enough to satisfy Waynefleet that, whoever it might be, it was not Stretton, and he smiled grimly into the little mirror of the cab.

Alicia overtook the man and came breathlessly to his side.

"David!" she said, "David!"

It was David Heath in a grey tweed suit with a soft

felt hat. He turned instantly at her voice and flushed deeply with an uneasy look in his eyes.

"Alicia? I . . . I . . . I did not expect to see you."

He stammered miserably and stared down Pall Mall towards Trafalgar Square, which was a golden place in the afternoon sun of an October day.

Alicia's face fell, and a sudden mist of tears came to her eyes. His coldness hurt her. She had expected him to be so glad at their meeting.

"You . . . you heard I had been ill?"

"Yes," said David gravely. "Are you better?"

"Did you know I had left the village?"

"Yes . . . my father wrote."

He pulled out his watch and looked at it, but his hand trembled violently.

"I think I must be off. Good-bye."

He raised his hat, but as he looked at her white face and saw the sorrow in her eyes he faltered and moved closer to her.

"Shall we talk somewhere? The National Gallery . . . a tea-shop? One can say nothing in the street."

"If you are in a hurry I will not worry you. I thought perhaps you would be glad to see me again."

There was a break in her voice which moved David painfully.

"Forgive me," he said. "I . . . I did not mean to be so boorish. Of course I'm glad."

They went down Pall Mall.

"Perhaps the Gallery would be best," said David. "It's student's day, and we could get a quiet room."

They went into the Tuscan School and found a seat in a small gallery with the Saint Sebastian of an early master.

"Tell me," said David. "Are you well . . . and happy?"

"I think I am well," said Alicia, "and I know I am happy. My happiness is like a dream, David."

David looked up at her and then down at the floor.

"I pray God there will be no awakening."

"You know I am with Stretton?"

David groaned.

"I guessed it."

"And are you sorry? . . . You blame me?"

"I am profoundly sorry. But I do not blame you. It is not for me to blame."

Alicia was silent.

"I think you do blame me," she said presently. "I think you imagine all sorts of horrible things and look upon me as a woman who has betrayed every moral law. Oh, but surely you are not so narrow-minded, David?"

"I suppose I am as narrow-minded as most men. Anyhow, I believe in law. The more I see of life, the more I believe in law."

"Do you mean religion—the stupid, stuffy, cruel old laws of orthodoxy?"

"I mean moral law, which is the basis of all religion."

Alicia laughed softly.

"My dear David, at the end of all our arguments I

have always found we were in absolute agreement. Do you think I revolt against moral law?"

"Tell me one thing," said David with deep anxiety. "Are you married to Stretton Wingfield?"

Alicia was thoughtful.

"Yes," she said. "I think so. Yes, certainly we are married. I told you we were living together."

David passed a hand over a haggard face.

"You think so!" he said, with a grim and hollow laugh. "You think you are married!"

Two lovers came into the gallery and passed through hand in hand, giving but a glance at the pictures. David lowered his voice, but spoke huskily.

"Alicia! oh my God, you are making a fearful mistake! You are *not* married. I tell you you are *not* married! One of these days that man will tire of you and break with a brutal hand the partnership that now seems to you so blessed and enduring. What will you do then?"

"I should die perhaps, or go mad; who knows?"

"And yet you take this risk?"

"Yes. I take it gladly."

"It's the risk," said David, "the risk. Good God, I don't pose as a Christian hero or a moral philosopher. This is not a question of faith. But don't you see you are putting aside the experiences of a million women? They believed as you do that it would last for ever. And they were abandoned by the men who had sworn fidelity. You set on one side the experience of a million broken hearts!"

Alicia said simply—

"I believe in Stretton's love, dear David."

"Then why doesn't he marry you? Tell me that!"

"He does not think it necessary. Love is a stronger bond than law."

"Oh, folly!" groaned David. "Horrible, ghastly folly!"

He got up and paced up and down before her.

"If ever he deserts you," he said, "I will see that he does not escape scot free like other scoundrels. I will break him into bits, and trample him into mother dirt."

"Hush!" said Alicia, white to the lips. "Hush! they will hear you! I would not hear such words from any one but you."

"Tell me," said David. "Does he treat you like an honest woman? Does he introduce you to his friends?"

"Yes. They come every day to our house."

Alicia's voice had a touch of triumph in it.

"To his women friends?"

Alicia hesitated.

"He is a bachelor. I do not know that he has any women friends."

David laughed cynically.

"A society man and no women friends! Where are the sisters and the wives of the men you meet?"

Alicia laid her hand on his arm.

"We are talking stupidly. Tell me about yourself, David. How are you getting on?"

David could not answer, and strode silently through the galleries, looking so haggard and stern that the students turned to stare at him—this long lean, powerful man of democratic type, with a beautiful woman by his side, who held her head high with its sad eyes and pain-drawn mouth.

"What drama is that?" said a young painter to a girl in a long sketching coat.

"Paolo and Francesca, I should say!"

"A good model for Beatrice—that Rossetti head."

David and Alicia said good-bye at the bottom of the Gallery steps.

"I am sorry I spoke like a brute. You know it's because we have been such friends."

"My poor David! You have been my best of friends."

She hesitated.

"Won't you come and see us sometimes? Stretton would be glad."

David started.

"Good heavens, no! . . . I couldn't! . . . But I am always at Erasmus Hall, always in the mornings and evenings. If you would come there——"

"Perhaps I will, one day . . . if you would not be ashamed of me."

"Good God!" said David, "ashamed——!"

Alicia gave him her hand, and he crushed it in his grip so that she almost cried out. Then he turned and, lifting his hat, strode away into the crowd.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE Individualists, as Alicia had learnt on the night of her arrival at Duke Street, when she had betrayed her ignorance of the Election, had just saved themselves from ignominious defeat. Out of sixty candidates twenty had been returned to Parliament. The Constitutionalists, who had held their majority, could afford to laugh at them good-humouredly. But the Socialists, whose votes they had split, and to whom they were both nearest and furthest in political doctrines—nearest because they posed as representatives of the democratic party, and furthest because they blasphemed against the gospel of Socialism—poured vitriol upon their heads as heretics and hypocrites.

Stretton Wingfield, who had made a bid for the leadership of the new party, was frightfully disheartened by the Election results. Alicia never knew, or guessed the suffering of the man during the suspense of the polling days, when he had been like a general who receives news of defeat after defeat upon his scattered forces. This acute mental tension it was that had caused his neglect of her letters, which had remained unopened—not at his flat, as he had said in self-excuse, but at the hotel which had been his headquarters, and to which they had been duly forwarded.

By an extraordinary and unfortunate coincidence the defeats had come first, like a volley of knockdown blows to Stretton. Pauncefoote was thrown at Manchester, Montgomery at Hull, Sidgwick at Bolton, Winkworth at Oldham, Stubbs at Preston, Halliday at Sheffield, Macarthy at Leeds, Swainton at Lancaster, and Barnaby at Newcastle. Within three days the Individualists had lost all their best men barring Wingfield and Waynefleet themselves, and a tail of nonentities like Percy and Hutton, who only counted because of their names, and not at all because of brains. In all those places the Socialists had come in with fat majorities, and the Constitutionalists themselves began to grow cold at the thought of an overwhelming tide of Socialism. But quickly the balance swung to the other side when the Midlands and London were declared. London was Constitutional to a man, and the Socialists, who had been shouting victory with a tomahawk dance over the imaginary mangled remains of "Feudalism" and "the Old Régime," sang smaller when they saw themselves defeated in many of their old strongholds.

Stretton Wingfield gathered only small crumbs of comfort from the carelessness of both parties. It was noticeable that the only successes of the Individualists were in small rural boroughs where the personality of local influence of the candidate counted for more than political creed. The net result was twenty—and Stretton had believed he would sweep the country with this new middle party between the revolutionary Socialists and the old Tory-Liberal forces!

Waynefleet dined with him at the Savoy when the last results had been declared. The heavy face of the man seemed calm and impassive as usual, when in repose, and the anxiety of the weeks of strife had not made another furrow on his high forehead. Stretton, on the other hand, was white, haggard, and tremulous, with tattered nerves. He drank more than Waynefleet, who was more used to wine.

"The game is up," said Stretton. "We have made historical fools of ourselves. We are the damned laughing-stock of the nation."

"With twenty seats, my young friend," said Waynefleet calmly, "we can do something in the House. We are not to be ignored! There is nothing to complain of, except lack of brain in the rank and file. You are young, my dear Wingfield, and therefore impatient. When you are as old as I am you will realise that to educate a nation to a new political idea is the slowest work a man may attempt. We are only the fore-runners."

"We are utterly discredited," said Wingfield irritably. "I see now that Conservatives are the only Individualists. They are the one force which can hope to check the Socialists at this time of day. Individualism and democracy is an impossible alliance."

"My friend," said Waynefleet, "you think so because all your instincts are conservative, and your democratic ideals are only a pose."

"Do you mean to say that I have been playing a traitor's game?" said Stretton fiercely.

"I did not say so. But frankly I am the only democrat among our small crowd. You are all tainted by blue blood or romantic sentiment. I, sir, am the son of a Derbyshire butcher."

"What the devil has that to do with it?" said Stretton, pouring out another tumbler of wine with an unsteady hand.

"It means that I am a democrat in blood and bone, whereas you are all democrats only because you dislike Socialism more than you love society. The distinction is subtle, I own."

"By God! Waynefleet," said Stretton, "I believe you are playing for your own hand all through."

"I am an Individualist and a democrat," said Waynefleet. "I shall live by my faith."

Well, all that was past history now, and Stretton walked arm-in-arm with Waynefleet through the Green Park, to take his seat on the opening of Parliament. There was a big crowd around Buckingham Palace waiting for the King, and it was not without difficulty that the two Individualists made their way through the dense masses at Westminster. Here they were recognised, and there were an ironical cheer and some hoarse laughter as some fellow shouted, "Vive Lafayette! Vive Marat!"

Waynefleet smiled grimly.

"They think it an insult to call me Marat. Well, he was the one man who had sincerity. L'Ami du Peuple! I could ask for no better name."

Wingfield had flushed deeply and scowled on the people.

"They love a nickname. But why they should call me Lafayette is a mystery. I have nothing in common with that vain noodle who gloried in constitutions and top-boots."

"I am not sure that you haven't, my friend." Waynfleet glanced at Stretton's careful dress and his clouded cane. "He was a sort of democratic aristocrat like yourself. What's wrong with the name?"

Wingfield released his friend's arm.

"I believe you despise me at heart," he said coldly.

"Humbug!" said Waynfleet gruffly. "That is school-girl talk."

The twenty Individualists were to sit on the cross benches between the two great parties. Moorhouse, Hutton, Percy, Osgood, Langdon, Huddersfield, Wingate, Fairhurst, Mathews, and Osbaldistone were already in their places looking uncomfortably self-conscious and rather scared. They were thin benches on the Government side, but the Left had come down early to the House and kept up a continual clamour of applause or groans as other members took their seats. The Strangers' Gallery was packed, and in the Ladies' Gallery, which several sessions before had been enlarged and relieved of its grille, Stretton caught a glimpse of Alicia looking down with a white face.

As Wingfield entered with Waynfleet, the Constitutionalists broke into loud laughter and jeers, which brought the blood to Stretton's face. But from the

Left came a deep groan, followed by prolonged hissing. Waynfleet turned upon them with a calm and impressive stare, putting back his mane with a heavy white hand. But Wingfield hurried to his seat and shook hands with Hilary Osgood and Moorhouse. From the Front Bench the Right Hon. Lord Hugh Unstead, who was now Colonial Secretary, Mr. Wordsworth having changed places with him, crossed over to the Middle and held out his hand to Stretton, an action which seemed extremely comical to the Left, who cheered derisively.

"Well, my dear nephew! This is an historical occasion. This is the first time a Wingfield has sat on the democratic side."

"It's time the tradition was broken," said Stretton lightly.

"There's something in that! But you will allow us a little amusement?" It is decidedly entertaining to see so many younger sons of the old stock on the side of the mob. Devilish funny! What does Percy's mamma say, I wonder, and Teddy's good father?"

He leant over to Moorhouse, and put his hand on his shoulder.

"So you have turned politician and intellectual, Teddy? You'll find it a poor game!"

"Oh, it's good sport so far, sir," said Moorhouse.

"Sport!" said Hugh Unstead. "Good heavens! This is a chamber of horrors. Well, good-bye, boys. Be good!" He smiled at them in his quizzical way

and strolled back to greet the Prime Minister, whose arrival was heralded by a burst of cheering.

The Debate on the King's speech was not so utterly dull and dreary as that performance usually is. The Socialists, smarting from a defeat which at the first had seemed like victory, were in a fighting mood and had many amendments on the paper, and as all the eloquence was on their side they made a really formidable attack on the Government programme. Their strongest men, Ricardo, Vesey, and Fillimore, waxed furious over the domestic policy of the Constitutionalists, which, they said, had been more reactionary than in the days of the old Conservative party.

Fillimore scored an epigram in the tail of his speech.

"The nation," he said, "like a sensitive medium, is hypnotised by staring at a fixed and shining point—the Constitutional head of the Prime Minister."

All eyes were turned towards Charlton, whose bald cranium glimmered brightly above the Front Bench, and there was a hearty laugh both on the Right and Left.

"This hypnotic state of the country," continued Fillimore, "will be followed, according to all pathological law, by mental excitability, which is often dangerous to the hypnotist."

Ricardo made a hammer-and-anvil speech in which there were none of Fillimore's flippancies, but a sincerity that was not unimpressive.

"The Socialists," he said, "have been retarded by a

temporary barrier of caste influences thrust across their way. But Socialism has moved the spirit of the people. It is a great tide which may be momentarily checked by a reef or a breakwater, but which no barrier may ultimately resist. It will sweep onward with a silent and irresistible force. It will dash to pieces any futile obstruction, and with the mighty impulse of a great spirit will break upon the shifting sands of folly and prejudice, and class bigotry, drowning them beneath deep waters."

Vesey in a less oratorical manner was more effective. With a brilliant handling of figures he set out to prove that the Government had wasted ten millions of money on the native rebellion on the Gold Coast which, he said, had been fostered to serve the private ends of a Chartered Company; that they had sunk five millions in bolstering up a scheme of pauper-relief which was simply an attempt to destroy the social labour colonies; that they had thrown away two millions upon the building of prisons at Dover and Canterbury which were chiefly occupied by political criminals who were the children of their own reactionary policy. He was interrupted several times from the Front Bench and once by the Prime Minister, who abruptly challenged a statement regarding the number of criminals condemned for political crimes.

"My figures," said Vesey, "include a number of prisoners who have not yet been condemned by law, but who have been on remand for more than three months. It is a system of terrorising which has only had its

counterpart in the French Revolution and in modern Russia. It is the blackest stain upon English history, but not so black as the letters in which the right honourable gentleman's name will be written in the future annals of this country."

The Prime Minister at once appealed to the Speaker, and the whole of the Right rose with shouts of "Withdraw!" The Speaker gave his ruling that the Hon. Member for Bermondsey East had used an unparliamentary expression reflecting on the private character of the Prime Minister, and amidst an uproar Herbert Vesey withdrew the offending words.

It was at ten o'clock that Stretton Wingfield rose to move an amendment:—

That His Majesty's Government do take measures to prevent the municipalisation of building, provision, and sundry trades, which is destructive of individual enterprise and of national economy and efficiency.

From each side of the House there came jeers and derisive laughter, and from the Left the shout of "Lafayette! Lafayette!" showed that the nicknames in the halfpenny Press had been adopted by the House.

Stretton stood before the tumult silently. He seemed a tall slim figure in his well-cut frock-coat, the lapels of which he held tightly. His head was thrown back a little, with an air of challenge, and his lips were firmly set. Yet, as a new-comer in the House, he was nervous

of this sudden demonstration. The groans that came from the Left did not scare him, but he was troubled by the laughter on the Right. Ridicule hurt him more than passion. Among the crowd of faces before him he saw his uncle leaning forward with that quizzing, ironical smile which was always disconcerting. For a few moments his mind was a blank. He could not remember a word of the speech which he had rehearsed during a week of anxious preparation. To save his life he could not have spoken a sentence of it. Good God! was he going to make a fool of himself? He was thankful for the continued noise, which gave him time to master himself. He could not distinguish a word of the shouts from the Right and Left, but the Speaker's deeply intoned "Order! Order!" was like the clanging of a bell in his brain. Something impelled him to turn his head and look upwards. He saw Alicia's face again, and her burning eyes were upon him. She seemed to look upon him from a vague mist, and her face was shadowy and undefined, but it seemed that she smiled across the House to him. He thought he saw her lips move and say something. She was sending a message of confidence.

Gradually the groans and the shrill laughter ceased, and Stretton found himself alone in a great silence. Waynefleet's hand touched his sleeve. and Moorhouse gave a dry little cough.

Then Stretton found himself speaking, and he was surprised to hear the sound of his own voice. But his brain cleared and he remembered his words.

It was an actor's speech, impassioned and elocutional with well-marked pauses, and phrases that had been thought out and learnt by heart. He quoted a passage from Emerson, and a line from Tennyson. His voice thrilled, and loosing his hands from his coat lapels, he flung them out with a dramatic gesture. His peroration was spoken quickly and in a resonant tone, and he was heedless of the interruptions that came from both sides of the House.

"The Individual," he said, "has been crushed under the wheels of this blind machine of Socialism. [Jeers from the Left.] The liberty of the soul has been stifled by the tyranny of State control. Private enterprise has been deadened by the overwhelming competition of State trust under the name of Municipal Government. England owed its former greatness to individualism. [Laughter.] The citizen was spurred on to great achievements by the knowledge that upon his own strength of character and his own powers of intellect depended his very life. Now he has no need of initiative and no opportunity for progress. He has been sentenced to the treadmill of the State prison. [A Voice: "Claptrap."] In return for his unintelligent labour he is housed and fed and educated and amused. His very pleasures are regulated by his municipality. Municipal theatres, municipal baths, municipal music, municipal recreation rooms, municipal libraries surround him with a deadening influence. [Laughter.] If he is foolish enough to work beyond the minimum required of him, the profits of his labour go to pay for the

pleasures of those who do not work, and for public advantages which he does not perhaps wish to share. [A Voice: "Why not?"] The home life of the people has been pervaded by a moral decadence. Municipal nurseries have destroyed the spirit of motherhood. Municipal meals have destroyed the responsibility of parents. Municipal inspection has destroyed the privacy and the self-respect of family life. The small trader has been crushed out by municipal trading, and instead of the struggle for existence which is the divine law of life [cries of "Oh!"], instead of the noble individualism by which the hard worker and the man of intellect gained the best rewards, there is now a soft bed for the lazy and the inefficient, who have equal opportunities and equal rewards with those who are their masters by nature and justice. The advancing tide of Socialism has swept over the nation [cheers from the Left], smoothing down individuals to a dead level of inertia and inefficiency, and the private liberty of the soul has been drowned in a sea of State authority. The Constitutional party has opposed Socialism only in the interests of caste and in the defence of the Crown. [Jeers from the Right.] They have so far secured the prerogatives of wealth and rank, and the fabric of the old régime. But the fabric is undermined, and the Crown itself is threatened by this destroying Socialism. [Cries of "Order!" and "Withdraw!"] They have not given a thought to the well-being of the people or to the true progress and liberty of a noble democracy. The people, therefore, have been seduced into Socialism be-

cause of the indifference and the reactionary policy of the wealthy classes. [Cheers from the Left.] It is only in a new party, imbued with the true spirit of democracy, prepared to oppose the doctrine of Socialism to the death, and to defend the liberty of the individual, that the nation may be rescued from this dreadful decadence. [Laughter from both sides of the House.] It is to the Individualists, or the Independent Democrats as we prefer to be called, that the people of England must look for a renaissance of liberty and national life." [Laughter.]

Stretton sat down with an instinctive feeling that he had made himself ridiculous. The derisive laughter of the House whipped his ears, and his nerves were so highly strung that he put a trembling hand on Waynefleet's knee and gripped it hard to steady himself. Waynefleet bent his head towards him and whispered.

"It was all right," he said. "A bit too oratorical, but you got home."

Then Waynefleet rose, a giant of a man with the shoulders of a coalheaver and a lion's head. His massive face, pock-marked and with heavy jowl, was as impassive as a mask, and there was a rugged grandeur in his look which silenced the noisy members of the Left and Right. It was characteristic of the spirit of the House that they were willing to listen to a man who had been identified for years with the philosophy of Individualism, and whom both the Constitutionalists and Socialists recognised as a strong opponent, though

they had treated with derision the speech of a younger man who had no reputation of his own.

Waynefleet indulged in no oratory, though in private life he was always an orator. He knew that the rhetoric which stirs enthusiasm at a public meeting is out of place in an assembly which is impatient of all but hard facts and plain common sense, which enjoys irony and hard hitting, but will not tolerate fanaticism or idealism. It was a hard measured speech, in which every sentence was a statement of fact. Occasionally a keen flash of humour shot like forked lightning upon the Left or the Right, bringing an angry murmur from them. Once a strong and brutal phrase stung the Socialists into fierce cries of "Withdraw!" But with a grave dignity Waynefleet substituted a set of words which were more parliamentary in expression but more deadly in their hidden meaning. The Constitutionalists cheered him, with laughter at the discomfiture of the Opposition. But he turned upon them with his heavy face, and silenced them by an attack so bold and menacing in its satire that the Socialists broke into counter cheers at the broadside among their enemies.

When Waynefleet sat down there were murmurs of applause from both sides of the House. Though he had not spared them, they admired a good fighting man, and old parliamentary hands whispered to one another that the House had heard the best speech since Parnell's great challenge to the Tory Government.

At the Division Stretton's amendment was lost by

425 votes to 22, and as the numbers were declared another wave of laughter swept through the House.

Stretton Wingfield left Waynefleet in the smoking-room and accepted Lord Hugh's invitation for a walk along the Embankment. Alicia had left the House immediately after his speech, sending through a note to tell him that she would wait supper for him at home. "Your speech was worthy of you," she scribbled, "but I could not bear, nor understand, the cruel laughter. Never mind! They will not laugh when they have learnt to fear you." Stretton had crushed the note in his hand and thrust it into his pocket. He was so conscious of failure that even Alicia's sympathy stung him to a keener sense of irritation. His uncle gossiped cheerfully about the beauty of the night, and stopped to look upon the river flooded with silver.

"Wonderful, isn't it? And yet some asses talk about the ugliness of London. Why, Venice is not so fine as this!"

Stretton did not answer him.

"How did my speech go down?" he said abruptly. "Did I make an absolute fool of myself?"

Unstead laughed carelessly.

"A pretty considerable one, I think!"

Then, more seriously, he gripped his nephew's arm.

"My dear Stretton, why the devil didn't you take my advice? This individualism is a poor sort of business. I rather admire that scoundrel Waynefleet. He made a first-rate attack. But you are in the wrong

box altogether. You belong to our side, body and soul, and yet you voluntarily adopt a pose which is perfectly transparent. Believe me, in the House nothing succeeds like sincerity."

"Do you mean to say there is any sincerity at St. Stephen's?" said Stretton with a scornful laugh. "My dear uncle, you know as well as I do that every one is posing all the time. It is a Parliament of poseurs."

"To a certain extent, yes. But most of us pose on the right pedestals. You are on the wrong one—and you are sharing it with another man. There is no room for you and Waynfleet on the same stone. He has pushed you off already."

"What do you mean?" said Stretton sharply.

"My dear fellow. He monopolises the situation. He is the only Individualist. The rest of you are hangers-on."

"Damn him!" said Stretton fiercely. "He hasn't played straight from the very first."

Unstead laughed in his light quizzical way.

"Of course you will quarrel before a week is out. You can't help being a Wingfield, though you do forsake the family tradition."

He changed the subject abruptly.

"By the by, who is that woman you have taken up? I like her face, but don't you think you're rather foolish?"

"It is my private affair," said Stretton coldly.

"Quite so. I have no wish to poke my nose into it. But as your uncle and a man of the world I advise you

to be a little careful. One of these days you will want to marry. There's Betty Huddleston waiting for a husband, and she was always fond of you I believe. Take my tip, dear Stretton, and settle down into a comfortable family. Poverty and romantic love are all right when one's young. I enjoyed them myself and do not regret it. But one must look ahead, you know."

The nephew and uncle parted at the corner of St. James's Square.

"We never hit it off very well," said Unstead, smiling, not unkindly, "but blood is thicker than water. Chuck Individualism, my dear Stretton, and come over to our side. In a few years I will find you a place, and if you leave fair women alone and marry a nice plain girl with a family influence you'll go far yet."

At home Alicia was waiting for Stretton and as he came in with a hard, white face she put her arms about him.

"My love!" she said, "my love! How proud I am!"

Stretton kissed her, but his lips were cold.

"My dear girl, there's nothing to be proud of. I've failed miserably. I shall never recover the effect of that fatal speech."

He sat down moodily, and pushing aside the tea that Alicia poured out for him took a strong dose of whisky.

Alicia sat down on the floor beside him clasping his arm.

"You are disheartened, dear one! It is the reaction after your long excitement. But you must not lose heart so soon! I was spellbound by your speech, and

although your enemies jeered, that was only natural. The more effective you are in debate the more they will hate you and try to discourage you. But you are speaking to a large public. Your words will be read to-morrow by the world. It is the great public that you must educate and convince. I believe public opinion is always on the right side in the long run."

Stretton laughed irritably.

"How can you think or believe anything in such cases? You know nothing about politics."

His words stabbed Alicia as though each one were a knife. They were the first unkind thing he had spoken to her, and she could not check the tears that suddenly filled her eyes.

She became silent, and Stretton, unobservant of her pain, drank his whisky, staring moodily into the fire. Presently he pushed the empty glass away from him and got up.

"Aren't you going to bed to-night? Good heavens, how white you are!"

"Yes, perhaps I had better go to bed," said Alicia. "Are you sitting up later?"

"Yes; I must write some letters."

He turned at once to his desk and lit an electric lamp.

Alicia stood at the door, looking at him with strange wistful eyes.

"Good-night, Stretton," she said.

"Good-night."

His pen was already moving swiftly over a sheet of notepaper, and he did not turn his head.

Alicia went out and closed the door after her quietly. But before going into her bedroom she stayed for a moment on the dim landing, with tears falling upon her clasped hands.

CHAPTER XXXIV

ALICIA, who had not had time to think during the month of her London life, when Stretton had been with her all the days and when his friends had made his house a rendezvous, now had too much time to think, and it was not good for her. Stretton went down regularly to the House at three o'clock in the afternoon and did not return, as a rule until midnight. Then in the morning he lay late in bed, reading newspapers or making notes, and often he would lunch away from home with political friends as he explained, to whom the lunch hour was a time of preliminary debate upon subjects occupying the attention of the House.

To Alicia it was a puzzle sometimes why all his time should be absorbed by parliamentary duties, especially as he rarely spoke in the House. That again was a source of anxiety to her. Like many people who do not understand the working of the parliamentary machine with all the wheels that revolve silently behind the scenes, she had imagined that a member must be always on his feet making speeches or taking part in full-dress debates. Yet days passed without Stretton opening his mouth, and when on rare occasions some expression of Individualistic opinions was made in the House the speaker was generally not Stretton but Cuth-

bert Waynefleet, who thrust in an ironical remark, or a brief statement of fact, that caught the attention of the newspapers.

Once or twice Alicia asked the reason of Stretton's silence, or hinted that he should speak more frequently. But he laughed at her ignorance, or replied with a certain irritation of manner that always hurt her sensitive nature.

"One can't be for ever talking nonsense."

Alicia laughed quietly.

"I want you to talk sense, Stretton!"

"My dear girl, the work of an M.P. is done mostly in the Committee-room, registering his vote in the right lobby, and in hammering things out in the smoking-room. Surely you know that."

"No, dear, I'm sorry I didn't."

"You will always be a country mouse," said Stretton, laughing more amiably.

So Alicia had too much time to think. She sat often for an hour or more with her hands in her lap, staring into the fire in Stretton's study. She brooded over hasty words, or cold words, that Stretton had spoken to her. He was very over-wrought just now, she could see. His nerves had gone wrong. So he said several times with a sudden apology when he had been abrupt to her. Even when he said nothing, she could see that sometimes he was putting a restraint upon himself in trying to master a sense of irritation. If she came to him when he was writing and put her arms about him,

or laid her head upon his shoulder, he would smile, but not with his old tenderness, and an unconscious movement of his head, or a stiffness in his attitude, showed her too clearly, and too sadly, that he would be relieved if she left him alone. Perhaps she was too sensitive. She reproached herself bitterly for not being more patient and cheerful, for taking too much to heart these little signs of nervous irritability which were surely caused by overwork, and not by any loss of love. She was sure he loved her still. How could she doubt it? He was not always cold and absent in his manner. Sometimes coming home late at night he would be excited by his old passion, and would take her close to him, and kiss her lips and hair, and call her "Lady of the Mist," and old love-names that would make her forget a long day of weariness and faint heart and miserable loneliness.

One night, when he came back from St. Stephen's, Alicia had fallen asleep in the armchair by the fire. Her face, half pillowed by the soft cushion, was flushed by the heat, but there were undried tears upon her cheek, and as she slept she breathed with quivering sighs as if she dreamed sadly. Stretton, who had come in quietly, stood looking at her, and the hardness melted from his face, and a sudden wave of tenderness swept over him. He knelt down and took her hand, kissing it, so that she opened her eyes.

"My darling!" he said, "what a brute I am to you. How beastly selfish I am!"

She smiled at him with exquisite gratitude, and pulled his head down to her breast.

"Oh, my love!" she cried. "How good you are to me!"

They talked late into the night as they had done in the school-house at Long Stretton, and Alicia confessed her great loneliness and her unfulfilled desires.

"I must have something to do—some work, Stretton," she said. "If you are to be away from me so much I must have something to occupy my mind. You have no idea what it is like—the long, long hours, the interminable day, the dreadful loneliness of the evening, waiting for you while the clock goes round."

"But my dear girl, surely there is plenty to occupy your mind—London, the picture galleries, the British Museum, all the books there. You should take up some course of study."

"I can't," said Alicia; "that is not what I meant. I try to read books, but my eyes only read the pages and my thoughts are far away. Sometimes I have read whole chapters without realising a bit what the subject of them is. I want some definite useful work, mere drudgery that must be done with accuracy. Can't I help you, Stretton? Can't I be your secretary?"

"Oh, I get all I want in the House of Commons Library, or the morning papers."

Alicia bent down her head upon his shoulder.

"You don't tell me things, Stretton. You don't give me your confidence. You come home after being

away a whole day, and you don't tell me what you have been doing, or what has been going on, or what people you have been talking to. There is a great gulf between us, and I cannot see what is on the other side."

Stretton was silent, and the firelight flickered on a brooding face.

"There is nothing to tell you," he said. "Every day it is the same, deadly dull committee work, or land taxation, or workhouse inspection, or prison reform, or death-rates, deadly dull conversations with stupid people of all sorts, smoking-room gossip, lobby-running, visits from constituents, party manoeuvres, personal quarrels and bickerings, and all the rest of the trivial things that go to make a parliamentary career."

"But those are just the things I want to know, all that is deeply interesting to me," said Alicia.

"Oh, my dear girl, how can you expect me to go over all that dreary business when I come home to get away from it and forget it?"

Alicia pondered rather sadly.

"At least you might tell me something about your own work, your ambitions, and the prospects of the Individualists."

Stretton laughed, with a note of bitterness.

"A new member soon loses his ambitions. He goes into the House with the hope of a Cabinet place before him, but in a little while he finds himself a mere spoke of an insignificant wheel in a great and complicated machine. If he hasn't unusual influence or

extraordinary luck, he has no chance whatever of advancement without years of steady drudgery. On the other side, of course, I should have had influence, but I burnt my boats, except the cockle-shell in which I float upon the political sea."

Alicia took his hand and kissed it.

"What has happened to Cuthbert Waynefleet and the others? They have not been here for some weeks since, except Hilary."

"Oh, nothing has happened to them," said Stretton carelessly. "But they begin to bore me."

"Do you mean to say you have quarrelled with them?" said Alicia anxiously.

"Oh, they are not worth quarrelling with. Whenever any one of them opens his mouth, which is seldom, thank goodness, the House laughs into his throat. The Individualists are not a success."

He smiled at Alicia's serious face, but with a hard mouth and no mirth in his eyes.

Alicia was moved intensely. When the world had been laughing at the campaign of the Independent Democrats, she had taken it quite—quite seriously. She had believed beyond all in Stretton, in his audacity, his courage, his eloquence, his knowledge of human nature, his confidence of success. And now within a few weeks of the new Parliament he seemed to have abandoned hope.

Oh, this was weakness! She tried to rally him by cheering words, she appealed to his fighting instincts,

to his blood. She stung him sharply by recalling brave words in which he had sworn never to be beaten. But he listened moodily, and then, impatiently, unwreathed her arms from his neck.

"I was a fool when I said those things. Let us go to bed. It's deuced late."

CHAPTER XXXV

HILARY OSGOOD asked Stretton for permission to paint Alicia's portrait.

"I have waited half a lifetime for a face like hers," he said, "and I believe I could do something like justice to it. It inspires me. I can feel genius itching at my finger-tips."

"You are a dashed impudent young monkey," said Stretton. "I am not going to let Alicia be the model of any canvas messer."

"My friend," said Hilary, with a gesture of tragedy, "if you refuse you rob the world of a masterpiece."

"Masterpiece be hanged!" said Stretton.

Hilary seized his hand and kissed it.

"You consent!" he said. "Praise be to Allah! The masterpiece shall be hanged on the walls of next year's Academy."

Stretton smiled grimly.

"I shall see you hanged first, in a hempen noose."

The idea, however, was not so displeasing to him as he made out that Alicia was very lonely. She was becoming nervous and highly strung, pleading always for work to occupy her mind. Well, the portrait would give her some interest in life, and Hilary would amuse her. Besides . . . he pondered deeply with frowning

brow, and when Alicia came into the room he looked at her searchingly, and gave a quick sigh.

"Hilary wants to paint your portrait. Do you object?"

Alicia flushed a little and smiled.

"My portrait? '*A Study of a Plain Woman, No. 235, by Hilary Osgood.*' Is that it?"

"Yes, that's it exactly," said Hilary, gazing at her with a look that showed the irony of his acquiescence.

"It's not a bad idea . . . though he is a shocking bad artist," said Stretton. "What do you say, Alicia?"

"Would you like me to sit for it?" said Alicia. She remembered that twinge of jealousy to which Stretton had confessed regarding Hilary.

Stretton strolled to the window before he answered.

"I have no objection," he said.

"Blessings to you both," said Hilary. "I see myself famous. I see great crowds gazing at a spiritual face with the soul's beauty in the eyes. I see myself listening to whispers of homage, though those around know not that the artist is among them. . . . I spare you the rest of this wondrous vision."

"Thanks," said Stretton.

"Not at all. To-morrow, then, at ten o'clock?"

"Isn't that too early?" said Alicia.

"Too early! Think of the brief hours of light. *Ars longa, lux brevis est!* Art is long, light is short."

When Hilary had gone Stretton had lunch with Alicia, and at the end of it hesitated a little as he said—

"By the by, I think of going out of town for the week-end. Do you mind very much?"

Alicia's face fell. She had been looking forward so eagerly to this week-end, when Stretton would be with her again for two whole days.

"I do mind very much," she said, smiling a little wistfully. "But that is my selfishness. Where are you going?"

Stretton coloured slightly.

"Well, the fact is my uncle has asked me down to Unstead Park. I haven't been there for years, and I feel I ought not to lose this opportunity of patching up a family quarrel. Don't you agree?"

"Yes," said Alicia, though rather doubtfully.

"You don't agree," said Stretton. "Why?"

"I think you are right—quite right. But somehow or other I rather distrust your uncle. I only saw his face that day in the carriage and heard him speak a few words, but they made me afraid of him instinctively."

"Instinct," said Stretton, "is another name for blind prejudice. It's a stupid thing."

"Yes . . . when do you start, dear heart?"

Stretton pulled out his watch.

"I must be off in another half-hour. I got James to pack my bag."

Alicia got up from the table, going rather white.

"Why did you not tell me before? Surely I could have packed your bag! Oh . . . but you tell me nothing! You keep everything back from me!"

Her emotion touched Stretton's nerves, and he flushed angrily.

"For Heaven's sake don't be hysterical."

She held on to a high oak chair.

"Haven't I a right to be hysterical? You do not trust me. For weeks you have been cold and silent. You keep your life in the world dark from me. You . . . you treat me as your mistress, and nothing else!"

It was Stretton now who became white.

"What do you want?" he asked. "I have brought you to this house and have played a straight game with you so far. You have every comfort; I deny you nothing."

"You deny me your trust and confidence."

Her voice faltered, and she broke into sobs.

Stretton went to the window and stared out with his hands in his pockets. Then suddenly he turned and went to her.

"Alicia," he said in a low voice, "do not let us part angrily. Forgive me."

He took her in his arms and she let him kiss her. Then she put her arms about his neck and clasped him passionately.

"Oh, Stretton! I love you, I love you!"

"I know," he said gently. "My dear girl, you have been very good to me!"

He soothed her, and then, when she wept no longer, he asked her to fetch his writing-case.

"I am tremendously sorry," he said. "I ought to

have told you before about the week-end, but it slipped my memory until the last moment."

She pressed his hand tightly, and then went to his study for the case. He had one or two letters to finish, and she sat by his side while he wrote them.

"You needn't forward any correspondence," he said. "It isn't worth while. I shall only be away four or five days."

Alicia looked up with a new surprise.

"Four or five days, Stretton?"

"Yes, possibly. I have paired at the House, and I want a change. There'll be some shooting—and I'm beastly run down."

The man came to say the cab was waiting. Stretton sprang up and took Alicia's hand, drawing her close to him.

"Good-bye," he said, "good-bye, my darling. Forgive me for having been a brute to you!"

Alicia kissed him.

"Don't talk like that, Stretton. It is I that should ask forgiveness. I have been so impatient and ill-tempered."

They stayed in each other's arms with a lingering embrace. Then Stretton went out to his cab.

Alicia waited at the front door, and kissed her hand to him, with moist but smiling eyes, as he drove off. He smiled back and waved his hand, but his face was white and rather haggard.

CHAPTER XXXVI

STRETTON'S genuine emotion at leaving Alicia—for a few days—reconciled her tenfold to the parting. There was no doubting the tenderness of his words, the strength of his passionate embraces. He had kissed her upon the lips; to her it was a long spiritual kiss, which had melted all his coldness into the memory of their first communion, and after he had gone she found her loneliness easy to bear because of the new trust she had in the endurance of his love. Her thoughts flew back a month—two months—to the day when she had come to London, almost mad. Stretton had been good to her, and so chivalrous and kind, so passionate in his repentance for what had really been an accident, or at most a little carelessness in the midst of harassing and exciting work. For a month—for nearly a month—they had been perfectly happy together, and Stretton had given his days to her ungrudgingly, with a kingly generosity.

Alicia thrust back the remembrance of another month of coldness, of impatience, of hasty words, of brooding silences. That was an unhappy dream, and had now passed. She kissed Stretton's photograph in a silver frame upon the piano, and then opening the

instrument played dreamily, until tears fell upon her hands and wakened her.

She wandered into his study and sat down at his desk where she had been beside him as he wrote his letters before going, and with the same pen she now covered several sheets of paper with expressions of love and self-reproach, and simple words of thanks for all the joy he had brought into her life, ending with a laughing plea for forgiveness that she should plague him on the first morning of his well-earned holiday when he would read her foolish words.

She sent the man out with the letter after her dinner in solitary state when she had smiled at the reflection of herself in the silver mirror—a woman in black with a full white neck, sitting very straight in a high-backed wooden chair like a figure in a pre-Raphaelite picture, and on either side of her a tall silver candlestick dropping a pool of light upon the polished table.

She told the servants not to wait up for her, and, pulling a low stool to the fire, sat there with her head against the arm of the sofa. In her fanciful way she was playing a game of make-believe, and pretended to herself that Stretton was close to her, and that her head was pillowed against his knee. The idea pleased her and a smile was about her lips, and presently her head dropped and she fell asleep.

But as the fire burned low and the candles flickered out and the chilliness of the early hours crept upon her, she whimpered in her sleep, and then woke with a sudden cry and a white face with frightened eyes.

"Oh, God!" she whispered, and struggled to her feet. "What a frightful dream!"

She groped about the wall for the electric button, and then switched on the light. As the room became bright again she caught sight of her own haggard face and tumbled hair in the mirror above the mantel-board, and a sudden terror seized her.

"Was it a dream?" she whispered again, putting her hand to her temples. She stared round the empty room as though she scarcely realised that Stretton was not with her, and as though the knowledge of his absence came to her with a fresh shock.

She put her hand to her throat with a little strangled cry, and then, picking up her long skirt, sped out of the study and up the stairs to her bedroom, where she stood panting against the door.

"What a fool I am!" she said. "What a fool and coward!"

But it was only when the morning broke that she fell asleep, and during her waking hours her mind had gone back to the words Stretton had said when he kissed her good-bye.

"He meant to say no more than that," she said to herself a hundred times. "What made me dream so horribly?"

It was not strange that when she went in the morning to Hilary Osgood's studio he started at the sight of her.

"How white you look and ill! What on earth is the matter?"

"Do you mean to say I am too ugly for you to paint, Bambino?"

She laughed, deceiving him with a touch of her old merriment.

"Nay, Madonna. I am not worthy that you should come into my poor hovel. But your beauty will transfigure all into gold and amethyst, and Parian marble. I scatter flowers before your feet."

He took a rose from a glass and strewed the petals on the floor before her.

"Is this what you call a poor hovel? What is your notion of luxury, Signor Bambino?"

Alicia looked round the studio, a high panelled room with a timbered ceiling, like an old English hall. It was the room of a man of artistic and antiquarian taste, with the money to carry out ideas. Trophies of arms were ranged about the walls, and at each corner stood dummy men-at-arms in complete suits of German mail richly chased. The floor was strewn with Persian rugs, and before the great chimney-place, where a log fire burned merrily, was a great black bearskin. In an alcove half hidden by a hanging piece of faded tapestry was a copy of the Venus of Milo, before which burned a dim red lamp.

"Do you worship that creature?" said Alicia.

"Yes, that is my religion—the Idea of Beauty."

A number of canvases stood faced against the walls, and a blank one stood ready on an easel before a dais, but there was not a single painting displayed.

"I cannot afford to buy good pictures," said Hilary,

answering a question, "and I could not bear to be stared at by my own or other people's failures."

"That is not very encouraging to me, and I have a good mind not to sit to you. I should not care to be another of your failures."

She teased him with this threat so that he became alarmed.

"Madonna! You will not be cruel! You are to be my great success. I feel at last the spirit of beauty has visited me, and I am blessed among men."

"You are a blessed young egotist," said Alicia, laughing. "Well, where do you want me to sit down, and how?"

Hilary held out his hand and took the tips of her fingers, leading her to the dais, upon which he had placed an old oak chair, quaintly carved.

"That was once a queen's chair," he said, "and shall be so again if you deign to sit on such a worm-eaten thing."

Alicia sat back with her hands upon the heads of two lions couchant, which supported the arms of the old chair. She sat very straight, with her head erect and a far-off look in her eyes. She had suddenly forgotten the existence of Hilary, and was wondering what Stretton was doing, and whether he had read her letter yet.

But Hilary drew a deep breath, and seized his palette and brushes.

"Oh!" he said. "Stay like that, for dear God's sake. Do not move!"

This, of course, caused Alicia to wake out of her reverie, and to lose her look of mysticism in laughter at Hilary's "high-falutin," as she called it, which led immediately to a mock quarrel, ending in Hilary's sudden abandonment of palette and brushes.

"My inspiration is gone," he said. "Your cruelty has ruined my hopes of fame—for this day at least, O belle Dame sans merci!"

Then he saw that she was shivering with cold in a studio that would never get warm however big the fire in the great chimney-place. He was seized with sudden remorse, and rushing to an oak chest produced an elaborate set of utensils for making coffee.

"Let art go hang," he said. "I shall never do anything at *that*, but I should have made a giddy fortune as a cook. Now sit on that fire, or as near it as you can get, and in ten minutes I will give you the most exquisite cup of coffee to be found nearer west than Constantinople—where I learnt to make it."

There was no painting that morning, therefore. Alicia was really cold, chilled spiritually as well as physically, by a night of wakefulness. She was glad of the fire and of the coffee, and of Hilary's friendliness. This morning she felt more drawn towards the young eccentric than the amusement he had given her before had allowed. He dropped his fantastic way of speaking, and became more reasonable and serious, and she believed that beneath all his foppishness and folly there was the heart of an honest gentleman.

She spoke to him presently of Stretton.

"Do not let him work too hard," she said. "He is not so strong as he believes, and I am afraid he will break down if he goes on like this."

Hilary gave a queer, short laugh. "Does he work so hard?"

"He is at that wretched House from the early afternoon till the small hours of the morning. It is too great a strain."

Hilary was thoughtful, and smoked a cigarette till it burnt his finger-tips.

"I suppose you know he has thrown overboard his Individualism?"

Alicia put her coffee down and looked at Hilary with frightened eyes.

"What do you mean?" she said faintly.

Hilary hesitated.

"Hasn't he told you? Then it's hardly my place to——"

"Oh, nonsense, nonsense," said Alicia quickly. "Stretton has told me nothing lately. He has been so moody and silent. Tell me what has happened."

Hilary laughed uneasily.

"Oh, nothing much has happened. Stretton had a quarrel with Waynfleet, and then a long interview with the Government whip. Since then he and twelve of our party have voted consistently on the Government side. It has smashed up the little Individualist party—that's about all that has happened—and it has no great significance in the history of mankind."

"Then Stretton has broken all his pledges and shipwrecked his own party?"

"That's about it. He hasn't played the game."

Alicia bent her head as though before a blow.

"Don't take it too seriously," said Hilary, looking rather anxiously at Alicia's white face and tragic eyes.

Alicia put her hand to her temples and gave a little moan.

"Oh, I do take it seriously, I do take it seriously. I know nothing about Individualism, but I believed in Stretton. I did not think he would play a traitor's part."

She took Hilary by the wrist and bent forward to him.

"Tell me," she said. "Has he been at the House all these hours every day . . . or was he lying to me?"

Hilary was silent, and fidgeted with uncomfortable embarrassment.

"Tell me," said Alicia. "I must know the truth. I can't afford not to know it. Don't you see that?"

Hilary jumped to his feet, and paced up and down the studio.

"Look here," he said, speaking excitedly and incoherently. "Stretton is my friend and I have an old-fashioned idea of friendship. But . . . I . . . I think you have a right to know the truth. I think I ought to give you a warning, and I should like to say that I love you . . . but that would be a caddish thing, just now. . . ."

Alicia laughed bitterly. "No, don't say you love

me, else I shall think you are a liar, too. Tell me . . . what is your warning?"

"Well," said Hilary, "the fact is that Stretton has been spending most of his afternoons lately at Haver-ing House . . . with Lady Betty Huddlestone. Jack Huddlestone tells me they are practically engaged."

"Who are practically engaged?" said Alicia stupidly.

She pressed her hair back from her forehead, and moistened her lips with a sip of coffee.

"Why, Stretton and Betty."

Hilary wondered at Alicia's quietude. She sat staring into the fire, and only the pallor of her face showed that she felt any unusual emotion.

"Perhaps I ought not to have told you. But Stretton was not playing the game with you. I thought you ought to know."

He bent over her and put a hand lightly on her shoulder.

"Madonna!" he said. "If you would let me look after you——"

She stood up, shaking off his hand as if it had stung her.

Then she shuddered violently.

"I thank you for telling me. If you say anything more I shall hate you—as much as I hate Stretton Wingfield."

She put on her hat and furs with trembling hands, and Hilary watched her with a scared look.

"I'm beastly sorry," he murmured.

She swept through the studio with her head high

and a strange expression of scorn upon her pale face.

Hilary opened the door for her humbly.

"Madonna!" he said tenderly, "Madonna!"

But she did not answer him or look at him, and went out into the street as if—so it seemed to Hilary—as if she were walking in her sleep.

CHAPTER XXXVII

ALICIA went home in a stupid, dazed condition. She was only conscious of one thing—that Stretton had betrayed her, that her love for him had changed into hate, suddenly and swiftly, but irretrievably. Her own honesty and sincerity made her hate a lie worse than anything in life, and the man she had loved had lied to her, not once, but many times. He had given her to believe that though he had lost hope in his party it was still *his* party. He had admitted failure, but he had put the blame of it upon the stupidity of his followers. He had not confessed his own betrayal. Oh, that was bad, a black and wicked thing, but there was something worse and meaner. He had been a living lie to the woman who loved him. He had pretended to her to be overworked at the House. He had gone down early in the morning, and she had given him her sympathy, wept in loneliness that he should work so hard, kissed his forehead and sighed that his brain should be so overstrained! And he had found time to spend part of each day with some other woman—Betty Huddleston—Lady Betty—and they were “practically engaged”! Oh, God! she had been nothing but his mistress after all! He had violated her love as though she were a shameless woman!

Alicia stood in the studio where only a few hours before he had held her in his embrace. She shuddered at the thought. With a sudden fierce passion she tore off a brooch he had given her and flung it on the floor. She tore at a ring which he had kissed before placing on her finger. It was tight, but she screwed it over the knuckle so that her finger went numb, and was bruised at the joint. Then she threw the ring into the heart of the fire, where it glowed with an intense brightness, so that her eyes could not bear it, and she broke down black coals upon it. Her intense excitement had maddened her, and she wandered up and down the room uttering little moans of pain as if she were in some physical torture. But when a knock came at the door she struggled into momentary self-command, and pressing back her disordered hair, cried "Come in" in a cold voice that was steady enough to keep up appearances. Stretton's man brought in a letter on a silver salver. For a moment she wondered whether she could take it. By a curious psychological sensation it seemed impossible to do anything but stare at it. Her will-power was not strong enough to command her muscles. Yet really her hesitation was only momentary, and when she stretched out her hand it did not tremble. The letter was from Stretton, and when the man had gone she opened it with extraordinary calmness. Her emotions had been so violent that when they were arrested by the sudden need of appearing at ease before a servant she suffered a reaction

and felt as though nothing would ever excite her again. It was a long letter, and sitting at the table by the electric lamp she read it slowly with cold and scornful eyes.

“MY DEAR ALICIA [wrote Stretton],

“I am writing what I know will hurt you terribly, yet it hurts me more to write it. In the first place I must tell you that I have resigned my seat in the House. For some weeks now I have seen the folly of my position. Individualism is not only a failure, it is a sham. At the beginning I had a certain sincerity. Waynefleet converted me to his views, and I plunged into his campaign with real enthusiasm, inspired to a great extent by your own dear sympathy and encouragement. But it was only a half-conversion, and a superficial sincerity. At the bottom of me, and instinctively, I am a Conservative. My democratic ideals were only intellectual playthings. Really, I have never been able to get away from my blood, or to break with the traditions of my class. In the excitement of fighting a campaign I was kept up by the mere lust of fighting when one cause is as good as another, and any cry is good enough to carry into battle. But when the campaign was over, and the glamour of the excitement had worn off, I began to discover my fatal error. I was in the wrong camp! Gradually I sickened at my own insincerity. I confess, too, I shrank from the ridicule of the House.

My father's ghost confronted me. I was dishonouring his name. He was the Rupert of the House, and I, his son, was the butt for every man's wit! I was labelled with a name which was a public mockery, the leader of a party of court fools. No, I was not even leader! Waynesfleet, low scoundrel and libertine as he is, was the only Individualist, and the House would listen only to him, while I sat by his side contaminated by his malodorous reputation without even the prestige of his ill-fame. Could I go on like this? Perhaps if I had more pluck and less honour I could have won a place by perjuring my better instincts. God knows! Anyhow I have decided to abandon an ignominious position and to start from a fresh place. I have resigned my seat on the democratic side, in return for the promise of a safe seat by the Government. My uncle Unstead has promised other things, which will at least give me a chance to redeem a miserable failure.

"This is only half of what I set out to tell you, though it will explain some of the motives for what is the most painful decision of my life.

"My dear Alicia, the time has come when we can no longer live together! Alas! Alas! I hear you cry out that you still love me, and that you believe in my love for you. I know, I know. No man has been more blessed than I have been in your generous, your splendid, your beautiful love. It has encircled me with a kind of spiritual fire, purifying and ennobling, and infinitely comforting. And I love you, too, with a

passion that will never fade from my heart. In years to come when perhaps I have a wife and children I shall look back upon these recent months as a beautiful and sacred dream. I shall never know another woman so good. You are the purest and the noblest woman on God's earth.

"But I am a weak man and not strong enough to resist the blind and hideous force of Fate. I know my temperament and I cannot struggle against it. You, I know, would be happy in poverty and insignificance. I should be so miserable that I should be a curse to you and to myself. And that is what would happen if we obeyed the promptings of our love. Poverty and squalid domesticity would be the atmosphere of our lives. Already I am heavily and damnably in debt. I can only clear myself by beginning a new life—without you, my beloved. I can only avoid social shipwreck by selling myself—I was going to say to the devil—but Betty Huddlestone, who is willing to marry me with all my debts, is hardly the devil! She is a good ugly girl and very rich, and in her way she loves me. It was Unstead who put the temptation in my way, though really it is Fate which has shuffled the cards and dealt out—Betty! Perhaps I *have* sold myself to the devil. Now that I write I think I have, and if I were a religious man I think I should go down on my knees and pray that I might be delivered from the Beast. But I am not religious. I am a

weak, ambitious, selfish wretch, who cannot be blind to his weakness or throttle his ambition.

"My dear Alicia, my good angel, I suffer torment in writing these things. But you will see my position, and you are more unselfish than I am. I have made arrangements to pay you £300 a year for life. Betty, who knows everything, agrees to that. I enclose a cheque now which will, I hope, make things comfortable for you from the beginning. Do not leave Duke Street until it suits your convenience. I shall not be back for a month.

"God bless you. I have sometimes been cold to you and ill-tempered, but only because of my worries. I am not worthy to kiss your feet. Yet I kiss you once more upon the lips, with a spiritual kiss in which there is all the love of my soul and body.

"STRETTON."

Alicia's eyes burned with a cold fire. Not once in reading the letter had any sign of tears softened her scornful look. The letter revealed to her in a white and ghastly light the rottenness, the vicious weakness, the essential selfishness of the man, and there grew upon her a sickening sense of shame that she should have loved this liar and coward.

She sat down at his desk, and taking up his cheque hid it quickly in an envelope, with her head turned away from it, as though the sight of it were horrible. Then she wrote an answer to the letter.

"I send back your money," she wrote. "I am no

longer your paid woman. I leave your house to-day, and your life for ever."

She rang the bell for the servant and told him to post the letter. Then she went upstairs to pack her few personal belongings.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

ALICIA's packing did not take long. She got into the same dress she had worn when she came to Duke Street, and put into her bags only the few simple gowns that she had brought from Long Stretton. Once during this work she broke down for a minute, and sinking to her knees with her arms stretched upon the bed broke into convulsive sobs. But she quickly mastered herself and washed her smarting eyes, and swept the last things into her bags with a quick and nervous energy. Then she rang the bell and ordered James to fetch a cab.

He hesitated for a moment at the door.

"When will you be back, miss?"

"I am not coming back, James."

For a moment a human look came into the man's face, which was ordinarily like a mask.

"I . . . I am very sorry, miss . . . if you'll allow me to say so."

"Thank you, James."

She took a sovereign from her purse and gave it to him.

"You have been very good to me. I hope I have not been much trouble."

"Not in the least, miss."

The man cleared his throat.

"Me and the other servants have always felt it was a pleasure to wait on a lady so—so unsolicitous, if I may say so, miss."

"Ah! The other servants," said Alicia. She took another couple of sovereigns, the last but one. It was her own money, not Stretton's. "Give this to them, with my grateful thanks. They have all been very kind."

"Thank you, miss. I am sure they will reciproke your feelings."

The man's face became a mask again, and he disappeared to fetch a cab.

But Alicia did not leave the house so soon as she had thought.

The housekeeper came up a minute later, in a state of flurry.

"If you please, miss, there's an old lady downstairs what says she is the aunt of the master. 'I am in great trouble, my dear,' she says, 'and I must see Mr. Stretton at once.' 'Mr. Stretton's away, mum,' I says. 'Away!' she says, that startled and white. 'Then he can't have got my letter. Good gracious! what shall I do?' she says. She went all faint-like, miss, and I asks her to come in and take a cup of tea. And there she sits, miss, in the droring-room, all in black and misery, like a widder waiting for the funeral."

Alicia was startled, and at the thought that one of the dear ladies was under the same roof she forgot her eagerness to leave the house.

"I will go down to her—perhaps she is ill."

"Ah! she looks that frail a draught might puff her away, bonnet and all, miss."

Alicia went downstairs and quietly opened the drawing-room door.

There she saw Miss Cecily. The old lady was sitting very quietly in a high chair with her hands in black mittens clasped upon her lap. Her white delicate face, framed in fair curls, beneath a bonnet with black sequins, was hanging down sadly, like a flower withered on its stalk.

Alicia went to her swiftly and softly, and knelt down by her side, taking her hands.

"Miss Cecily!"

The old lady looked up with a nervous little start.

"Alicia? Oh, my dear. I am so glad to see you! Where is Stretton?"

In her agitation she did not realise the significance of Alicia's presence in Stretton's house. For a few moments it seemed to her the most natural thing to see her protégée again in London.

"Stretton is away."

"How terribly unfortunate!" said Miss Cecily, with excitement. "He cannot have got my letter telling him the dreadful news."

"What news, dear Miss Cecily?"

The little lady burst into tears.

"My dear sister is dead. She died yesterday at our friends' house in London. The cold journey was too much for her! Her poor heart stopped when she

lifted a cup of tea. It was spilt all over her new gown."

She put her head on Alicia's shoulder and shed sad tears.

"Poor dear Miss Agnes!" said Alicia.

"I am left alone now, my dear," sobbed Miss Cecily. "And I used to pray that I might be taken first. . . . We shall never sing another duet."

Alicia tried to soothe her, but the old lady wept like a little child. Presently she pushed her chair back and stared at Alicia with a sudden astonishment.

"My dear," she stammered, "what are you doing here . . . in this house?"

Alicia bent her head and was silent.

"What are you doing here?" repeated Miss Cecily. "I—I—do not understand."

For a moment Alicia wondered whether she should lie to her, whether she should hide Stretton's infamy and her own shame from this dear soul. But her despair, her infinite need for sympathy and for a woman's love, her bitter anger against Stretton's treachery, broke down her hesitation, and she told the truth, simply.

"I have been living here with Stretton."

Miss Cecily gave a little gasp.

"With Stretton?" she said, with a kind of frightened wonder in her voice. "You have been living with him?"

Something seemed to dawn upon her, and raising trembling hands, as though she would hide Alicia from her sight, she said in a whisper—

"Then it was Stretton——?"

"Yes," said Alicia; "it was Stretton."

Miss Cecily drew a deep breath and buried her face in her hands.

Alicia sat with her hands in her lap, and there came to her in the silence that followed a feeling of awful loathing for the man who had stolen her heart and then flung it bleeding into the dust.

Miss Cecily clutched the arms of her chair, her pale eyes dimmed with tears.

"How terrible! . . . What would poor Agnes say?"

Then she bent forward eagerly, ever so anxiously.

"My child . . . tell me . . . he has married you? . . . he has made you an honest woman?"

"He has abandoned me," said Alicia, a sudden flush of anger stinging her face. "He has betrayed me, and tired of me. I am leaving his house this morning. I should already be in the streets if you hadn't come."

"In the streets?" said Miss Cecily, with a look of horror.

"Yes . . . or in the river."

Miss Cecily raised her hands again.

"Not that!" she whispered.

Alicia bent her head.

"No, I should not do that. I was a hypocrite when I said that. I should not let a man's baseness lower me so far. I shall have to struggle on somehow. London is a great cruel world, but there is always work to be got by strong and willing hands. It is only the weak who really go under, but I am strong. I sup-

pose, even though I have no 'character,' I can get a place somewhere, in a factory, or some low-class shop. There is plenty of dirt in London that wants cleaning, and I suppose they are not too particular about the soul of a woman who scrubs a floor."

Miss Cecily listened to her with growing horror.

"My dear!" she said. "My dear! . . . This is too terrible!"

"No, it is not too terrible," said Alicia. "There are thousands of women like me, women who have been worse dealt with and have to suffer more. It is not more terrible for me than for them."

"Oh, why did you not tell me?" said Miss Cecily. "You never wrote to me, though I prayed for you every night that you might be kept from harm."

"You prayed for me? Oh, that was good of you . . . and yet, as you see,"—she smiled wistfully—"your prayers were of no avail. I suppose I am too wicked?"

Miss Cecily shook her head.

"You are not wicked. . . . I shall never believe *that*! I said so often to poor Agnes, who is now in heaven, 'Alicia was weak,' I said, 'but she was not wicked. It is the man who deceived her who is wicked.' Oh, to think that *that* was Stretton, my own nephew."

She struck her frail hand upon the arm of the chair.

"I will never speak to him again!" Then she mopped her eyes with her handkerchief, and broke into reproaches and lamentations.

"To think that he should have come down to our village to bring such misery . . . and after we had treated him with such love and kindness! I used to think he was so good, so true, so brave! Many a time I have stinted myself to send him money. I know how expensive it is in London, and the shop-people are all thieves, my dear. And poor dear Agnes used to say when she sent him his cheques, 'Stretton is a good young man, we must not begrudge him this money, though we are not rich.' Oh, but he was a serpent in our own bosom. To think that our own nephew and a Wingfield should be so base!"

Alicia began to fear that this excitement would make the old lady ill. She tried to soothe her.

"Don't think about it any more, dear Miss Cecily. I can never forgive him, because, because he has ruined my life . . . but I shall build up a new life, I hope. I am not going to be faint-hearted or yield to despair."

She stared out of the window as if she looked into that new life, as indeed she did, and finding it so grey, and cold, and cruel, she had a momentary weakness, and burst into tears. To a woman the sight of another woman's tears is always an appeal to her motherhood and tenderness. Miss Cecily rose from her chair and went over to the girl, taking her head in her hands.

"My child," she said. "My poor injured child. I—I am a weak ignorant woman, and I feel quite lost without my dear sister . . . but, but I feel that perhaps God has brought me to you at this time of your despair . . . with a definite purpose. My own sor-

row made me selfish. I think I should have dwelt with it too much, and gone down to the grave a lonely and selfish old woman. . . . My dear . . . save me from that! Come back to me to the village. Come and share my lonely home. It shall be yours until I die."

She trembled excessively as she spoke, and her tears fell upon Alicia's hair.

Alicia looked up with a kind of frightened joy in her eyes. She clasped the old lady's hands and covered them with kisses, but she could not speak a word.

"I think poor Agnes would approve of what I say," went on Miss Cecily. "In her lifetime she was sometimes a little severe . . . but always kind, always merciful, my dear. And now that she is in heaven, I think, oh, I am sure, she would wish me to shelter you, and do something to redeem our nephew's sin. You will come with me then, my dear?"

"No, no," said Alicia, in a broken voice. "I couldn't!"

"It would be for my sake; I have no one to take care of me. I should pine away in loneliness. You hardly know what my dear sister's loss means to me. Every room is empty without her . . . but not so empty as my heart! So you will take care of me, Alicia? You were always so good to me . . . I should be very happy to have you."

Alicia refused again and again, though she wept with joyful gratitude at the invitation, which seemed to come straight from the goodness of God, offering

her a haven in which to find shelter for her wounded heart.

But at last Miss Cecily's earnest entreaties overcame her opposition, which sprang from a reluctance to accept so great, so infinite a favour, as it seemed to her, in her sense of shame and despair.

"May God reward you," she said, kneeling on the floor before Miss Cecily, with her arms about the old lady's waist. "I think you have saved me from a pit of hell."

"Hush! hush!" said Miss Cecily. "It is most kind of you, my dear, to share an old woman's life. I shall always be grateful to you."

CHAPTER XXXIX

IN front of the Brixton Town Hall a great crowd, packed so densely that there was none of that swaying to and fro or those ceaseless combinations of individuals and groups that characterise a crowd loosely coherent, stared upwards at a white board on which certain figures suddenly appeared, and then disappeared, and then reappeared with different totals. And on the board two names in large black letters stood out unchanging, while the numbers against them altered at regular intervals. The names were—

DAVID HEATH (S.)

STRETTON WINGFIELD (C.)

Every window in the Town Hall was blazing with light, and occasionally dark shadows passed across them, sometimes vague and blurred, but sometimes so clearly silhouetted that the outline of a man's profile was easily recognisable. A battalion of policemen kept a hollow square before the building. To those pressing behind them or feeling the heavy weight of those stalwart men in blue who leaned backwards upon them with outstretched arms it was difficult to see the reasonableness of that open space which would have given

breathing room to many who were being crushed and stifled. But an English crowd takes its discomforts generally with good humour, and though now and again there was a sudden and dangerous pressure from behind and a deep and menacing roar which might perhaps have jangled the nerves of a foreigner who did not know the abiding lawfulness of a great gathering of respectable English citizens, it always subsided quickly as mounted policemen backed gently on to the front ranks, to the mirth of those behind.

Into the hollow square a little white dog wriggled its way by some miracle of canine ingenuity, and then, scared by its solitude, sat down and shivered. A great roar of laughter clattered against the windows of the Town Hall, and when the dog howled in terror of the awful noise another great shout drowned its yelping. It is one of the standing jokes of an election, and the little white dog in the hollow square is like an old "wheeze" at a music-hall which never fails to bring the house down.

In an upper room of the Town Hall a small group of people listened to the laughter and the groans and the hoarse cheering of the crowd outside. But though they listened, smiling sometimes, because the laughter of a great concourse is strangely infectious, their eyes watched the tellers at the board of green cloth where piles of voting papers were being counted and sorted, each paper fluttering from hand to hand, swiftly as if it had a life of its own, until it lay dead upon one of the last piles. A voice shouted out the numbers, a

hoarse, husky voice, and another voice repeated them, a thin, querulous Cockney voice.

Wingfield	.	Six hundred
Heath	.	Four hundred and two
Heath	.	Four hundred and three
Wingfield	..	Six hundred and one
Heath	.	Four hundred and four
Heath	.	Four hundred and five
Heath	.	Four hundred and six
Wingfield	.	Six hundred and two.

Although at first sight it seemed as if the people in the room belonged to the same company, an observer would have realised that in reality they belonged to two groups, between whom there was antagonism.

A low buzz of conversation met from either side of the room, but did not intermingle across an invisible barrier. The centre of one group was a man who does not need special description. It was David Heath, the blacksmith's son, now a rather methodistical-looking man in a frock-coat, with a white collar, into which his firm chin was buried as he sat with his legs stretched out and with folded arms. His heavy brows were drawn down into a frown as he listened to the monotonous counting in while his name was repeated fifty times a minute; but his eyes were keen and alert, and he smiled when frequently a friend at his side patted his shoulder with an encouraging gesture, or another tapped him on the knees with a word of triumph.

"You are winning, my boy. You are creeping up."

"He is still two hundred ahead."

"It was two hundred and fifty a few minutes ago."

"It will be a close thing."

"Wingfield doesn't look too happy."

On the other side of the room Stretton Wingfield stood by the side of his wife, a handsomely dressed woman with a plain, good-humoured face, of which the most noticeable features were an upturned nose and rather large black eyes. She whispered merrily at times with six or seven young men surrounding her, tapping one on the arm when he burst into a rather noisy laugh, and shaking a finger at another when he swore softly as there was a run of votes for Heath. Stretton was restless, and walked several times to the window to look on the crowd and to breathe the fresh air of the night. It was his face that was seen in profile by the crowd, who greeted him with mingled groans and cheers. Stretton listened to the noise and tried to understand its significance. Sometimes the groaning was loudest and heralded his defeat, sometimes the cheering was predominant and promised victory.

He tried to hide his uneasiness, and spoke a few joking words to his wife. But he bit a finger-nail to the quick, and every now and then passed a cold hand over a haggard face. He glanced frequently at his opponent, and envied him his calmness. Once after a long spell of votes for Heath their eyes met with a flash of triumph on the one side and hatred on the other.

To all but those two men in the room, whose political

fate was being counted out, the contest had nothing unusual in its character, and was no more nor less exciting than any other election. They did not know that a more intensely human drama was being played out to its climax in that room. They did not guess that one man was seeking vengeance and the other sanctuary and self-defence. Only the two candidates knew that this was a duel, with Fate or Luck, as the umpire. David Heath, as he sat there with folded arms, outwardly so calm, was praying God that he might come out on top with Wingfield crushed and broken at his feet. He thought of Alicia, who had been betrayed and abandoned by that smiling scoundrel who had sold himself to a rich wife, and he prayed inarticulately, but with devotion, that to-night he might give him his punishment. Six months had passed since he had heard of Stretton Wingfield's abandonment of Alicia, and he had been like Hamlet, who kept putting off the vengeance upon his uncle. He had sworn to break the man's body, but it was better to crush his soul. And the chance had come. God had given his enemy into his hands! When David Heath heard that Wingfield was standing for Brixton on the Constitutional side his heart leapt within him, for the "S.F.L." had already chosen him—David Heath—the Master of Erasmus—to contend the seat for the Socialists. He sent a personal challenge to Stretton:—

"We fought once before in a dark lane. Now we shall fight in the open and in the light of day. But

I will complete the punishment this time, and the memory of the woman whom you betrayed will not make your defeat less bitter."

He regretted having sent this letter, which he had written in a moment of unbalanced mind when anger and hatred blinded him. But he knew that he had stung Wingfield to the quick, and he was not sorry for that. On both sides the contest had been fought with the gloves off. David Heath had not scrupled to attack his opponent's private character, and the name of "Judas" was the watchword of the Socialists. Wingfield had retorted with equal animosity, and jeered at "the village blacksmith" as an ignorant demagogue and a political prig. But "Judas" was the more effective word, for the British public hates a turncoat, and they still remembered the Individualist campaign.

As the figures neared their totals conversation ceased, and all in the room crowded to the tables. David Heath left his chair, and stood motionless by the tellers. Wingfield gnawed at his finger-nail again, and his anxiety was evident.

He still led. He had a thousand and fifty votes to David Heath's thousand and twenty. But Heath's numbers had been steadily mounting up, and now he came closer and closer until they stood even at a thousand and eighty. Wingfield was white to the lips, though he smiled cheerfully as his wife glanced at him with an expression of concern.

There was only one ballot-box left, and as the

papers tumbled out and flew from hand to hand there was no doubt as to the result. Heath's name was repeated monotonously, and Wingfield scored but ten more votes. The totals were flashed from the board outside.

DAVID HEATH (S.)	.	Total 2225
STRETTON WINGFIELD (C.)	.	Total 1090
Socialist gain		

A storm of cheering battered the Town Hall, shaking the floors and windows; it rolled upwards in great volleys of dull sound, and the silence in the upper room seemed more intense because of the tumult without.

A dozen hands patted David Heath on the back. But for a few moments he was not conscious of these congratulations. He stood motionless still, with his arms folded across his broad chest. He glanced at his opponent, but strangely enough, now that victory was in David's hands, he did not feel that sense of triumph over a fallen foe which he had anticipated as one of the sweets of victory.

As the result was declared Stretton swayed a little and breathed heavily. The room was hot and he felt faint, and there was a loud singing in his ears which drowned the shouting of the mob. So he had failed! Curse it, he had failed! . . .

Then he remembered. He must play the part of a man. Hang it all, he was a Wingfield, and he must not

show the white feather before his own class! His brain cleared, and he laughed, quite naturally and easily.

"Better luck next time!" he said.

He went over to David Heath.

"I congratulate you," he said. "It has been a splendid fight . . . and the best man has won."

He spoke the words gallantly and held out his hand.

David hesitated for a moment, and in that moment he realised the admirable courage, the splendid "good form" of his opponent.

He took Stretton's hand and grasped it.

"You are very generous," he said.

A week later David Heath, M.P., travelled down to Long Stretton. He wore a rough brown suit and a felt hat, in which he was more easy than in the frock-coat of his London life. As he strode down the village his friends greeted him with deference, not perhaps without a touch of hostility. They felt that he had "got beyond them." But in his native air he lightly assumed his old yokel slouch and the broad burr of his country speech. Jonathan was standing at the door of his shed, and father and son met each other after many months with that silent hand-grip which, to most Englishmen, is more eloquent than many words.

That evening as David in his shirt sleeves was playing on the anvil again, "to pull his muscles up," as he explained to Jonathan, who sat smoking and watching him with placid enjoyment, a woman's figure stood framed in the doorway. David saw her, and dropped

his hammer and then, to hide a sudden embarrassment that seized him, unrolled his shirt sleeves and buttoned them at the wrist.

It was Alicia who came in quietly.

She was looking thin, and there were a few grey threads in the brown coil of her hair. But there was a healthy colour in her cheeks and a look of quiet peace in her eyes. She was dressed in white with a rose at her breast, and a broad straw hat shaded her face.

She gave both her hands to David, and smiled at him with her old steady friendliness, without a trace of that affectation which spoils so many women's smiles.

"It is always good to see you at home," she said. "You are so naturally a blacksmith."

David laughed.

"You mean to say I am so unnatural as a member of Parliament."

"Well, it is difficult to imagine the fact. But I am very glad of it. You have done splendidly, and it was always my hope for you."

She took a seat on the anvil, just as she used to in the old days, and to David it seemed then that all that had happened between that time and this was nothing but a dream.

Jonathan got up presently and, on the pretext of stoking the kitchen fire, left them alone.

For a while they talked casually, and Alicia gave him the gossip of the village and news of Miss Cecily,

who was now a prisoner in the Hall, a very frail and delicate little invalid.

Presently David spoke abruptly of what was in his heart.

"Will you still refuse what I have asked so long?"

Alicia looked at him gravely and without emotion. She put her hand upon his knee as he sat beside her on a wooden bench.

"It is too soon to talk of that. . . . I am very grateful to you, David. Your friendship has been so loyal and good and true. I have sometimes thought lately that such friendship would be a better security in marriage than the feverish passion that is called love. . . . But I could not go to you with a heart that is only half-healed, that is, indeed, often raw and bleeding."

"I will not be impatient," said David humbly.

"No, let us have patience. There is a wonderful magic in that. I find that patience brings peace, and that is better and more enduring than the excitement of joy, which so soon passes— Don't you think so?"

"No, I don't," said David. "I am an optimist, and I believe in joy . . . though I have not yet tasted it."

Alicia smiled, and there was a soft light in her eyes as she looked up at him.

"Be patient, my friend," she said.

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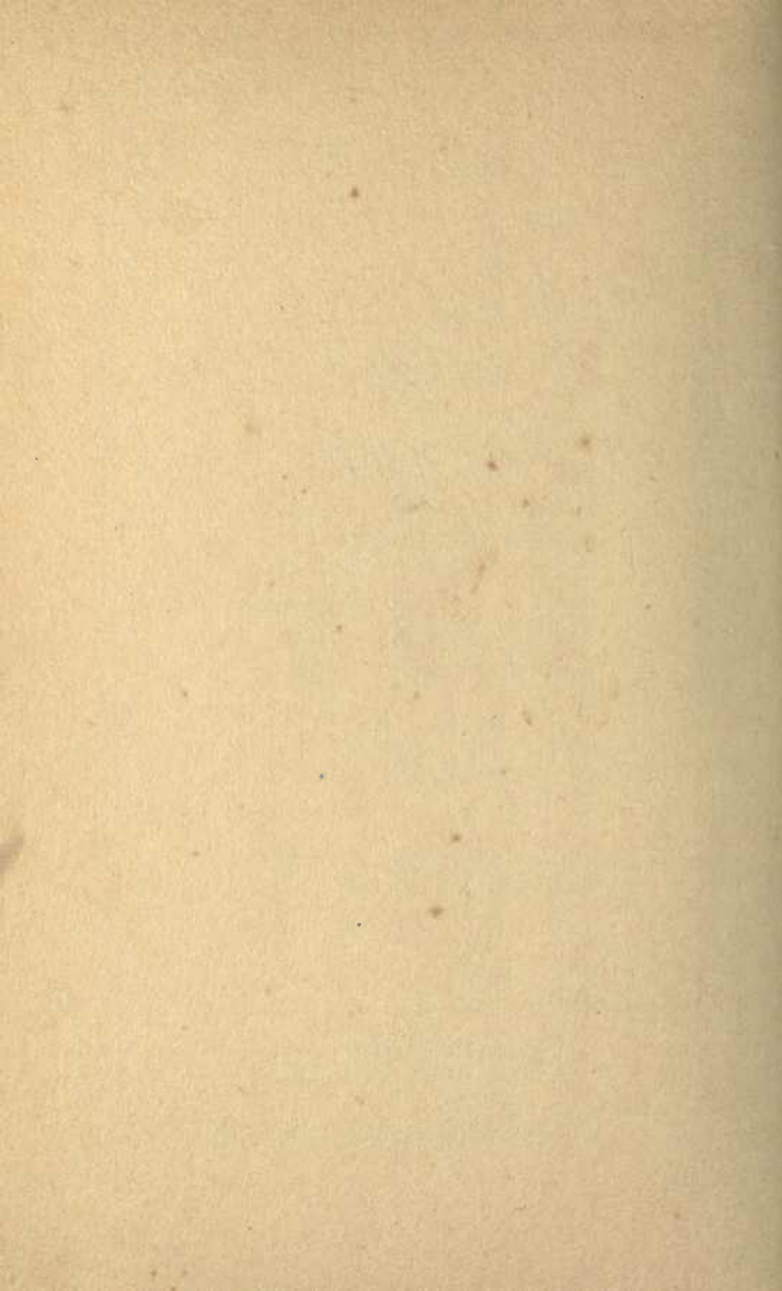
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